

Creating a Tapestry

Motherhood and Womanhood Across Borders

In this essay, I examine three primary threads that connect my own biography with those of my grandmother and my mother. Grandma lived her entire life in a small Mexican village, where she raised five children without much help from her family or her husband. Mama, the youngest of Grandma's children, left this village before her twentieth birthday and immigrated to the US, where she raised three children. I, Mama's youngest child and only daughter, left her home and found a home in academia. As I illustrate, each of us managed difficult decisions, often in the face of our family's expectations of us. Our ideas of what constitutes "home" entail geographic place, conceptual space and notions of self-empowerment. Moreover, our biographies highlight varying expressions of motherhood, each of which is complex in its own right. While it is easy to point out how our lives are different, these stories highlight the need to acknowledge how each thread in our family story relates to each other.

Introduction

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to women and immigration (Hondagneu-Sotelo) and the impact of migration experiences on mother-daughter relationships (Belknap; Rastogi and Wampler). Others have questioned the nature of intergenerational relations for families that are separated by immigration (Wenger). Some researchers are apt to consider how parents, especially mothers, are purveyors of an ethnic and national culture, which affects how they parent (Glassman and Eisikovits). In many ways, this paper is about immigration, intergenerational familial relations and motherhood, yet there is so much more to the story of the three women I discuss here. As mothering

in a global context is the focus of this issue, I see the present discussion as also involving two primary questions: How do intergenerational relations affect how one mothers and experiences motherhood? Also, how does immigration affect how one mothers and experiences motherhood?

Here I present the story of three women whose biographies are connected by more than biology and history: my grandmother, my mother and myself. There are many parallels in our lives, which emerged because of and in spite of one another's biography. We have made and managed difficult decisions, often in the face of our family's expectations of us. Our ideas of what constitutes "home" entail geographic place, conceptual space and notions of self-empowerment. Moreover, our biographies highlight varying expressions of motherhood, each of which is complex in its own right. Before I discuss the threads that hold us together, let me introduce you to three women in my family.

Grandma, Mama and Me

My Grandma

My grandmother was born in early 1905 in the small village in western Mexico I call Ticihuâ.¹ She was the oldest of six children, and she did not continue formal education beyond the fourth grade. Around this time, she took control of her family's kitchen and started selling goods that she crocheted herself to contribute to the family's well-being. Her family had "some money" because her father worked for stretches of time in Northern California before returning to Mexico, his wife and his children. (I found my great-grandfather listed in a 1924 Northern California directory, which listed his address and occupation "yardman.")

Family dynamics changed drastically in the early 1920s when Grandma met my grandfather. Her family did not approve of him, arguing that he only wanted Grandma for her money. Despite their objections, my grandparents eloped and her family cut her off financially. My mother told me that Grandma's family gave her sisters houses when they got married, while Grandma got a bag of coins upon her nuptials.

Together my grandparents had five children, although my grandfather did not stick around to raise their children with Grandma. (No one knows where he went or what he did.) Without help from her spouse or her own parents, Grandma had to be the sole and primary provider for her family. She learned to sew, eventually becoming a seamstress who made pants and jeans for local laborers. Family members remember her feverishly working with the sewing machine day and night. My mother recalled numerous occasions when Grandma was so focused on her work that she forgot to prepare food for the children. In 1951, she used her earnings to buy a home for herself

and her children for 3000 pesos, which was then the equivalent of \$240 U.S.

My family told me that several men in Ticihuâ found Grandma attractive primarily because she had status in the community and she owned her own home. Regardless, she rebuffed their advances, raised her children on her own and remained loyal to her husband. In the early 1960s, my grandfather reappeared, this time afflicted with stomach cancer. Grandma set up a bed for him under her stairs and tended to him until his death in the spring of 1966.

Relatives remember Grandma as small, tiny really. They also remember her as hard-working, strong-willed, strict and religious. As my mother recalled, “She ruled with an iron hand.” She made any child who was behaving badly kneel in a corner on uncooked beans. Talking or laughing at the dinner table was a sign of disrespect that resulted in Grandma “[picking] up her metal cane and [cracking you] in the head.” Grandma rarely laughed with her children and grandchildren because, as my relatives saw it, doing so “would be a sign of weakness.”

In addition to her “iron hand,” family members remember Grandma’s softer side. While she was not quick with hugs and kisses, she showed affection with a pat on your head or shoulder. One cousin remembered showing Grandma off to her 1st grade classmates: “We lined up...she took each child’s face in her hands and blessed them.” Another cousin recalled how Grandma taught her to crochet: “We spent hours every day making [a] dress for me. Spending that time with her made her a little less mean.” Grandma also showed care through her fondness for home remedies to cure ailments: she rubbed oils on one cousin’s stomach and passed a feather back and forth over it to cure her Montezuma’s revenge; and she tied coffee grounds encased in a banana peel around my mother’s neck to rid her of her tonsillitis. (My cousin joked, “Yeah [the oils and feather] worked [because] I am still here!” while my mother argued that her banana treatment did nothing but make a huge mess in her bed.)

Although her family of origin rejected her, Grandma never left the small Mexican village where they all lived. For her, Ticihuâ was a place where people knew each other and where people knew her. The U.S., on the other hand, was too far away, big, cold and impersonal, a fact she relayed to her children during her one and only visit to the U.S. She died of natural causes in Ticihuâ in the spring of 1990, at the age of 85.

My Mama

Mama was born in late 1940 in Ticihuâ. She is the youngest of Grandma’s five children. When she was a child, Grandma taught Mama how to crochet and she would spend hours on her craft. (In fact, I guarantee that she is working on some sort of needlepoint project at this very moment.) I asked her about

her educational background and she told me that she went further than her siblings did: she completed the sixth grade.

What I know of Mama's life in Ticihuâ comes from the few pictures I have seen, the stories family has shared over the years and the stories she herself told me on those occasions when I, as a little girl, climbed into her bed. One of my favorite pictures is of Mama as a teenager wearing a poodle skirt and bobby socks and singing on a stage. Beautiful and radiant, she is the quintessential 1950s teen; you cannot tell if she is performing at Radio City Music Hall in New York City or in the center plaza in Ticihuâ. In the stories she told me, she was playful and adventurous, usually getting into trouble with one of her sisters.

While I thought Mama's stories were ultimately characterized by fondness for Ticihuâ, only recently did I recognize the pain in her stories. Her memories of Grandma's family are shrouded in pain because she often felt monitored and scrutinized by her aunts and cousins. To her, this treatment was a lingering effect of this family's rejection of Grandma for marrying my grandfather. Mama has few memories of her own father, though. He left Grandma when she was pregnant with Mama and he did not return until Mama was about fourteen. She has no memory of seeing him before then.

Most of Mama's recollections of Grandma involved how strict and hard-working she was. Her toughness and industriousness meant that Grandma was often too busy to care for Mama and her siblings, so Mama looked to her oldest sister as a mother figure. This sister braided Mama's hair, making her cry because the braids were so tight on her tender scalp. It was this sister who took Mama to a doctor to remedy the tonsillitis that did not go away despite the banana peel and coffee grounds. When this sister died in the early 1970s, Mama experienced a lengthy period of grief and mourning.

Mama also expressed pain when I asked her how she ended up immigrating to the U.S. When she was in her late teens, she got engaged to a man, and soon discovered that he fathered a child with another woman. To manage her heartache, she decided to leave Mexico and move to the U.S. where her older brother already lived. (I found out that my uncle moved to the U.S. in 1951 at Grandma's urging because she wanted him to experience life outside of Ticihuâ.) She said she never liked Ticihuâ anyway and she always wanted to leave: here was her opportunity to do so. In fact, one of Mama's sisters said that Mama "wasn't cut out for a small town life."

In 1960, a few months shy of her twentieth birthday, Mama immigrated to California to live with her brother. She helped him and his family by caring for his children. (At that time, my uncle and aunt had four young children with another on the way. All told, they had seven children together.) A few years after she immigrated, mutual friends introduced Mama to my father, himself

an immigrant from Indonesia. They were married in the summer of 1963 and had three children together: two sons and a daughter, me.

1977 was an important year in Mama's life: that year she became a U.S. citizen and she completed her high school diploma. Soon afterwards, Mama got her first paying job for a local department store, which allowed her a degree of financial independence. Eventually, she landed a position as a clerk for the school district in our hometown. Some of her earnings went to paying tuition at my Catholic high school when my father did not understand why anyone would pay for an education, let alone a girl's education. She saved up her money and eventually bought a car of her own. My parents' marriage dissolved in the late 1980s and they divorced in the early 1990s. In 1995, Mama married my stepfather, but that marriage lasted just under two years before he succumbed to lung cancer. Mama has never remarried.

Although she managed to create a home and life for herself in California, Mama returned to Mexico each summer to visit Grandma. Her travels were made possible largely by the fact that my father worked for the airlines. She mostly traveled alone, but there were a few times when she traveled with us kids. The last time Mama made the trek to Tichuâ was for Grandma's funeral in 1990. Since then, she has not returned and she expressed no desire to do so. Now that I recognize how unhappy she was with "small town life" in Tichuâ, I can understand how difficult it was for her to return and why she is so resolute about never returning.

And Now, Me

I was born in the summer of 1972 in northern California, and I am the youngest of three children and only daughter. (We permanently relocated to southern California the summer that I turned two.) My family, particularly my brothers, protected, doted on and amused me. It was my brothers who taught me how to tie my shoes, jump rope and ride a bike. In fact, the overwhelming majority of my childhood memories involve my brothers ... with my mother always in the background.

I had a happy childhood. There always seemed to be music in the house, whether it was from the radio, our records or my father and brothers playing instruments. My brothers and I had a constant stream of friends visiting us. When we were not with our school and neighborhood friends, we were playing, laughing, going to the beach and spending holidays with cousins from my mother's side of the family who also lived in southern California. We also had the luxury of travelling to visit my father's family in the Netherlands.

Although most of my childhood memories involve my brothers, my mother was always nearby. Mama tried to teach me to knit, crochet or do needlework. She thought that getting me to knit something for my Barbies would pique my

interest. Besides the few latch hook projects I completed, I was not interested in things that involved yarn and thread. Instead I was more interested in books, learning and school. It is no surprise to anyone in my family that I did well academically and chose a career in higher education.

Mama, in particular, encouraged me to excel in school. She bought me math workbooks so I could practice multiplication and division for fun. With her assistance, I got my first library card so I could lose myself in the words and worlds of Madeleine L'Engle, E.B. White, and Beverly Cleary. At the same time, she was tough on me when I let my grades slide: I once brought home a B on an assignment and she threatened to pull me out of the Catholic high school for which she was paying. Arguably, Mama's decision to pay for me to go to a Catholic high school five-and-a-half miles (9 km) away from home rather than the public high school one mile (1.6 km) away had the greatest effect on my academic trajectory. (The academic standards for the school I attended were far more rigorous than those at the local public school.) My stepfather constantly made this point to Mama when I finished my undergraduate career and began my graduate studies.

In the fall of 1990, I started college at a university that was just over 100 miles (about 170 km) up the coast from home. While I was academically prepared for college, as the first in my family to go to college, I lacked the cultural capital necessary to fit in and succeed. Added to these feelings of unpreparedness, my parents were getting divorced and I scrambled to find any semblance of home, security and comfort. My memories of my four years in college are characterized by sadness, confusion, fear, loneliness and guilt for leaving Mama alone (even though both of my brothers were still living with her).

As I approached the end of my undergraduate career, I was sure of two things: I wanted to continue my schooling, and I was ready to leave California. In fact, none of the graduate programs I applied to were in California. In the summer of 1994, I boarded a train from California to New England, where I eventually earned my master's and doctorate degrees. I completed my graduate work in 2003 and assumed a position as an assistant professor of sociology in the Midwest. Once I moved here, Mama commented that I was "slowly but surely moving closer to home." Although I get back to the California at least once a year, I have no intention of moving back. Home is here in Illinois.

Stitching Our Stories Together

Literature on Mexican and Mexican American families discusses familism, or obligation and orientation to one's family (Baca Zinn and Pok; Rastogi and Wampler). This research indicates that familism is multidimensional as it involves such elements as family structure, behaviors and attitudes (Bacallao

and Smokowski). Some scholars have also addressed the structural conditions that influence and bolster familism and other aspects of family life (Baca Zinn). I see the a number of the structural conditions that shaped my family, such as gender, intergenerational relations and immigration.

Myriad threads connect the biographies that I outlined in the preceding pages. For the sake of brevity, I highlight three strands that I consider most significant for how our stories connect and intertwine: (1) we managed others' expectations of us as daughters, mothers and women; (2) we created homes for ourselves; and (3) we expressed our own brands of motherhood. Moreover, each line, which I discuss in turn below, highlight the role that intergenerational relations and immigration play in weaving our stories together.

Managing Expectations

In many ways, Grandma was the embodiment of the “traditional” Mexican woman and mother, the *madresposa* (Hryciuk). She was hard-working, lived her whole life in Tichuâ and remained strong in her Catholic faith throughout her life. As a wife, she remained loyal to my grandfather even though he was absent for most of their marriage. According to my family, it was Grandma’s “Christian duty to take care of [her husband].” Identifying her work as “Christian duty” implies that Grandma understood what others expected of her as a daughter, mother, wife and woman; she managed these expectations in the best way she knew how.

Numerous aspects of her biography suggest that Grandma was anything but traditional, though. She was the primary breadwinner, who used her earnings to provide for her children and buy a house for them all. Most telling, she defied her family’s wishes by eloping with a man they did not like. (It is not clear how much of her decisions was based on her love for my grandfather, her disregard for her parents or some other factor. We will never know for sure.)

Meanwhile, Grandma raised Mama as she herself was raised: to be an obedient and good Catholic woman and daughter. Mama contested these expectations, especially because they were rooted in her family and in Tichuâ. To Mama, leaving Tichuâ meant the promise of more, better and greater opportunities and experiences than if she stayed. Her leaving had harmful consequences on her relationship with Grandma. In their communiqués over the years, Grandma chastised Mama for leaving her alone (even when at least one of Mama’s sisters was still in Tichuâ), while never asking Mama about how her husband and children were doing. (While corresponding with her other children, however, Grandma would ask about their spouses and children.)

Years after Grandma died, Mama and I watched “Like Water for Chocolate,” a movie based on Laura Esquivel’s novel by the same name. After the movie, Mama was able to make sense of why she thought Grandma treated her so

harshly. The Mexican mother in this story prevents her youngest daughter from marrying the man of her dreams because tradition holds that the youngest daughter is to stay home, never marry and care for her aging mother (Esquivel). Hence, as the youngest daughter in her family, Mama was supposed to stay in Tichuâ and care for Grandma. Mama left instead, and it is uncertain whether Grandma ever forgave such a transgression.

Not only did Mama physically leave Grandma, but she also chose not to teach her children how to speak her native tongue, Spanish. When I asked Mama why, she explained, “I thought that teaching you Spanish would make it hard for me to learn English. I did not want to rely on you to get around, at the doctor’s office, in the grocery store.” While Mama’s decision to maintain an English-only relationship with her children was driven by her desire to assimilate, it created a wedge in our potential relationship with her life in Tichuâ and with Grandma. Hence, as Grandma stayed in Tichuâ to manage the expectations (and disappointments) others had of her, Mama managed others’ expectations of her by leaving and making it difficult to maintain certain aspects of mother-daughter ties.

Unlike Mama, I did not grow up with the expectation that I would remain unmarried and stay home to take care of Mama for the remainder of her life. If anything, I thought—and continue to think—that she expected me to excel academically and professionally while being married with children of my own. I have never been married and I have borne no children. Thus, I defied her expectations of me, which has resulted in numerous conversations (and arguments) about my being “alone” and “in need of security in my life.” Though my doctorate and tenure are markers of my academic/professional success, neither one holds much weight as my marital and motherhood status.

Defining Home

Grandma, Mama and I wrestled with others’ expectations of us and our own expectations of one another, which inevitably shaped our understanding of “home.” In essence, we made homes for ourselves because of and in opposition to each other. As I explain below, in light of—and in spite of—Grandma’s marriage, Mama’s heartbreak and my educational aspirations, we still managed to create a place to call home.

For Grandma, home was Tichuâ, which was where she was born, where she raised her five children and where she died. It may seem odd that she opted to stay in Tichuâ her whole life, especially after her family rejected her for marrying my grandfather. (We will never know exactly why she stayed.) I do know, however, that she preferred Mexico to the U.S. because the latter was too far and impersonal for her taste. Although Grandma visited the U.S. only once, she was connected to it throughout her life: her father worked in Northern

California during her childhood, and three of her children immigrated to the U.S. during her lifetime.

Yet, it is unwise to argue that Grandma's staying in Ticihuâ is a sign of powerlessness and acquiescence. Scholars often equate women's mobility with power and their immobility with powerlessness (England), while critics of this thesis push us to acknowledge women's rootedness as a resource as well as a constraint (Gilbert). Perhaps staying in Ticihuâ arose out of Grandma's emotional ties to her family, what some scholars consider "normative familism" (Baca Zinn), and to the village itself, in addition to her own habits of behavior (Gilbert).

Whereas Grandma stayed in Ticihuâ, Mama looked for any chance to leave. Heartbreak in her late teens provided that opportunity. Researchers maintain that family members are involved in decisions to migrate—as was the case of my uncle who took Mama in when she came to the U.S. (Sherraden and Barrera). This research asserts that few people migrate without their family's knowledge. In Mama's case, her family knew she was leaving, but she claims that she never told her family why she was leaving. Ultimately, she made a home for herself in the U.S., where she eventually got married and raised her children.

Mama's desire for a life outside of Ticihuâ was incongruent with what Grandma wanted for her. (Note that Grandma wanted her only son to immigrate to the U.S. so he could have exactly what Mama craved.) Grandma wanted Mama to make Ticihuâ home, whereas Mama wanted to make anything but Ticihuâ her home. This divergence in wishes and expectations resulted in Grandma constantly asking Mama how she could leave her alone and Mama resolving never to return to Ticihuâ.

When I think of my role in this legacy, I realize that I too had a lifelong quest for a place to call home. The home that I have made for myself is not just a geographic place as it is also a conceptual space: Southern California may be my childhood home, but my adult home has been outside of Southern California (geographic) and within academia (conceptual). My current home conflicts with the one Mama made for herself: I left California and I have no intentions of moving back. Such discord was magnified when I stepped into the world of academia, a domain that no one else in my family has entered. But my journey to find a home was not smooth considering the amount of guilt I experienced, especially when I left for college.

Expressions of Motherhood

As I suggested earlier, there is much evidence to suggest that Grandma was the *madresposa* (Hryciuk), the "traditional" Mexican woman and mother who is hard-working, religious, strict and loyal to her husband. Yet, much of her biography presents an expression of Mexican womanhood and motherhood that is more complex than previous research asserts (Hryciuk; Smith). Grandma's

brand of motherhood was not just defined by her relationship with her spouse and her children as she had to contend with her own familial expectations and connections. Thus, Grandma is what I call a complex-traditional mother.

Not only do my relatives claim that Grandma raised her own family how her parents raised her—especially in terms of their lack of affection—but they use the rift in family relations due to Grandma’s marriage to my grandfather as the primary explanation for why Grandma was the type of mother she was. To Mama, Grandma was tough “because she didn’t want [her kids] to make the same mistakes she made.” Regardless of these perceived mistakes, Grandma dealt with the consequences of her decision in the best way she knew how: she stayed in Tichuâ and worked diligently to provide for her children. Her decision suggests how complex Mexican motherhood looked throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, it had an extreme effect on how she mothered her children, including Mama.

Mama’s model for motherhood came from what she knew in Tichuâ, a small village in another country, primarily in relation to her mother and her oldest sister. Yet, her firsthand experiences with motherhood have been in the U.S. Immigrating in her late teens and grappling with cultural expectations from two different countries lead me to identify Mama as a transitional mother.

Scholars have examined such transitional motherhood among immigrants and the unique challenges that develop as a result of their immigration (Hondagneu-Sotelo). This research suggests complex intergenerational relationships as parents weave their original cultural identity with their newer American identity (Gu). Such relationships become more complicated when the values associated with the original identity conflict with the newer identity, such as when parents who come from a culture that values interdependence (i.e., familism) raise children in a culture that favors independence (Tummala-Narra). Conflicts along these lines have certainly characterized Mama’s brand of motherhood and its effects on me.

Although I have been certain about a life in academia for a while, my life is characterized by ambivalence toward motherhood. This uncertainty is apparent in a memory I have being a four-year-old sitting at the dining room table with Mama. We were discussing what I wanted to be when I grew up, so I had folded a sheet of paper into 16 squares and Mama helped me write a different occupation that I could be in each square. Together we filled out 15 squares (teacher, lawyer, doctor), but we could not figure out what to put in that 16th square. Not wanting to leave the paper incomplete, I wrote out “mother” in the last square. I remember the expression on Mama’s face as being of both amusement and crestfallenness.

I cannot say that I do not want to have children of my own. Certainly, I love children and I enjoying watching my family and friends’ children grow, learn

and explore. It would be untrue if I said that I do not wonder if I am or have cheated myself out of something potentially rewarding. Yet, I do not think that I have not accomplished anything by not having children of my own. This issue emerges from time to time among my students in my Marriage and Family classes and family members, especially Mama.

In fact, I think I mother outside of conventional notions of motherhood and mothering. For instance, my friend's daughter is one of the brightest lights in my world. We play, we laugh, we talk, we cuddle, we sing. Everyone refers to me as her "Third Mother." Furthermore, I tend to treat my college students as if they are my own children. I want them to succeed; I care about their academic, professional and personal growth and progress while they are students and after they graduate. Essentially, I would identify as a transcendent mother because my regard and care for others surpasses the conventional bonds of motherhood (i.e., blood, marriage or adoption). This transcendence is evident in my scholarly areas of interest, one of which is motherhood. Indisputably, this curiosity stems from my desire to make sense of Grandma, Mama and myself as mother.

The Tapestry We Created

For too long, I have wondered how I got to be where I am and who I am. I focused most on what makes me different from Mama without paying much attention to how I am so like her. Now that I know more about Grandma, I can also say that I am like her too. Although I did not pick up the sewing and needlepoint that Grandma and Mama love so much, I can see how I am part of a tapestry that they created.

Growing up, I did not have a relationship with my grandmother. She lived in Mexico and I lived in the U.S. I visited her a few times with my family, but I never had a conversation with her. Grandma could not speak English, and I could not speak Spanish. I remember how she looked though: she was so small with such long gray hair. One of the few clear memories I have of her is of me in her sitting room, which was where she slept, watching her brush and braid her silvery mane. The house she lived in by herself seemed so huge to me, with its outdoor kitchen and its outhouse. Everything about her was so foreign to me: her language, where she lived and how she lived.

Even though I grew up in the same house as Mama, so much about her was foreign to me: her accent, her way of understanding the world, her expectations of me to be a young girl who would not mind going to Catholic mass in dresses that I found itchy and restrictive. Growing up, she constantly commented on how independent I was. I always thought that she meant it as a compliment, but in my adulthood I started to question whether she was

praising me or punishing me for defying the kind of woman she wanted me to be. The way I see it, I got my independence from her and from Grandma, for better or for worse.

I think these intertwined stories that I presented here highlight the numerous factors that made and continue to make women's lives as women and mothers so challenging. For Grandma, Mama and me, the issues that influenced our biographies concerned how we managed others' and our own expectations of each other, how we eventually created "home" for ourselves and our varying and complex expressions of motherhood. Our mobility—staying like Grandma did, moving to a new country like Mama and finding a new conceptual home as I did—certainly affected how we mother and experience motherhood. Yet, we have to acknowledge that so much about our lives would not have been possible without each other (Rubio).

¹Rather than revealing the real name of this village, I have chosen a pseudonym that means "we (are) women" in Nahuatl (Carochi and Lockhart).

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