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Augusta College
Rock Island, Illinois

*Documenting the Undocumented: An Ethnography of Mexican Immigrant Juan
Estrada Salazar*

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As a Latina within the academy, I often wonder where I go to seek out my much needed history. The story of my ancestors, of my land, of my culture. For clarification, not simply the one they tell of our struggles, but the ones they tell of our triumphs- of our amazing ability to survive the most difficult situations, and still have the fight in us to find that silver lining. Where are *these* stories? I began to realize how important these stories were to me when I stepped foot on my undergraduate college campus. An environment filled with bachata and cumbia, spanish love, and the occasional smell of a burnt tortillas was no longer surrounding me. Instead, I stepped foot in a space that I did not see as my own, occupied by stories of legacy college athletes and spanish music that is never populer to spanish people, just the people who think that in those four minute they are exotic. I needed to reclaim this space, I knew it belonged to me too. It was just not easy to see that all the time, so I began to look for stories of my culture the only place I know where, *mi familia*.

To begin my journey, I chose to interview my grandfather, whose remarkable story I will do no justice to, but deserves to be heard and documented. As I began to explore these questions more, as I began to take courses and read more literature on Mexican immigrants and the generations that follow them, I realized understanding my own history and the story of my grandfather would piece together a lot of what I was looking for. My grandfather, Juan Estrada Salazar was an extraordinary man with an even more extraordinary story.

Although a couple stories of my abuelitos migration and early life in the United States were told every once in a while, I decide that to do this project correctly I had to sit with him and truly engage in this experience, a conversation which turned out to be a total of 6 hours. In these six hours I got to know a piece of my grandpa that I never knew. The stories he told, those that were emotional, devastating, and uplifting turned out to be about the very same experiences that led me to my path as the first in my family to go to college. Sharing this space with my grandfather, allowing him to tell me his stories was so

important to the project, particularly because we are in a time where immigration is highly discussed, but never by immigrants themselves. Due to fear of detention and deportation, we deny a monumentally large group of people the time and space to speak for themselves. I hope that in that time and moment I shared with my grandfather, he was able to comfortably tell his story, and I hope that his story can have an impact on other Latinas that seek out such a special history, the way it did for me.

His story begins in La Capital, Mexico. In 1964, my grandfather had a home in Mexico, but simply a few years later, he made the biggest decision that roughly 1,000,000 immigrants make a year and came to the United States. I will share with you all pieces of our conversation in which he tells me of his journey migrating, the reasons he decided to come, and if he, more than 50 years later, is happy with his decision to leave all he had ever known to come to the United States.

When I sat down with my grandfather on our black suede couches, I started our conversation by telling him something that was really important to me, and that I hoped would get him to understand why, for the next few hours, I would be asking for so many details about his life. I realize as I get older, as I am more involved in professional spaces where I see few people that look like me, this oral history and storytelling is what I have to hold to, what I have to not forget who I am and where I come from. I never want the story of my grandparents, the struggle of my grandparents, but the triumph of them to be forgotten. I intend to document their history in order to preserve something very meaning to my own story.

My grandfather's name is Juan Estrada Salazar. He now is in his 70's. My grandfather is a storyteller, and a great one at that. Anyone who knows him, whether for five minutes or a lifetime, knows he can tell a great story. In 1964, my grandfather was 24 years old. He was born and raised in *La Capital de Mexico*, or the capital of Mexico, Mexico City. My grandfather was tall, thin, fair skinned, brown eyes, and had thick curly black hair that almost looked blue in certain lighting, as my grandmother would always say. My grandfather was curious and at this time was attending a small community class in

Mexico City during the weekdays from four in the evening until 6 (Estrada). He was studying physics and engineering, but reminded me various times in our conversation that it was very different then what I may an education to be (Estrada). After school, my grandfather would go directly to work at an automobile shop where he was a mechanic from six in the evening to midnight. My grandfather so vividly remembers the long tiresome nights, but reminded me how much he cared about getting an education, so ultimately it was worth it. In the year '64, my grandfather was already married to my grandmother, Ana Maria Hernandez, and had three children, my aunt, Mireya Estrada, and my two uncles, Cesar and Juan Carlos Estrada. My grandfather mentioned that he and my grandmother for so long had thought about coming to the United States, but it had become increasingly difficult because the economy in Mexico was so poor at that time. Almost all money he was woking to gain was being spent on bills, food, and shelter, leaving little possibility of the dream to come to the United States with some financial security. (Estrada). Despite this difficult realization, my grandparents knew that if they did not come to the United States, this was the life they would have to live, so my grandfather said that after roughly three years after, he had finished his studies and he and my grandmother decided their only other option for a comfortable life would be to come to the United States (Estrada).

The Bracero Program, which began in the 1940s, was an executive order signed after an agreement between Mexico and the United States that allowed millions of Mexicans to come to the United States under the condition that they worked as agricultural labors (Hernandez). This executive order was signed because there was a huge shortage of labor workers after WWII, and the United States agreed to allow Mexicans to come, so long as they worked and provided their labor (Hernandez). This program allowed millions of Mexicans to start a new life in the United States. However, roughly, 20 years later in the mid 60's, the program ended, right around the time my grandfather came to the United States. I asked my grandfather about this and if this was a reason he came. Typically, the stories I may hear about

immigration around the 60's are in relation to the Bracero program, however, my grandfather told me he did not come to the United States as a result of this program.

After my grandfather shared with me that he did not arrive in the United States as a result of this, he began telling me of how he did. My grandfather said he knew a man named Octavio that he worked with at the automobile shop who knew someone who was a *coyote* (Estrada). A coyote is a Mexican slang term that is used to describe someone who helps folks go from Mexico to the United States. Octavio told my grandfather where he could find the coyote (Estrada). My grandpa said he was nervous because at times on the news you would hear of coyotes setting people up and kidnapping them (Estrada). However, he said although he knew this was a possibility he still had to use this opportunity to try to make it to the United States. It was difficult to get into contact with the coyote, he stated. My grandfather said he met the man roughly six or seven hours outside of Mexico City in a tiny *pueblo*, or neighborhood (Estrada). My grandpa said he vividly recalls taking a bus for hours and still walking miles to meet the coyote at the exact spot he requested (Estrada). My grandfather remembers meeting the man in an alleyway where there was really loud music and a few little shops that all seemed to be owned by the same family. Inside one of the shops is where my grandpa met the coyote (Estrada). His name was Salamon. My grandpa said he sat down and immediately Salamon begin explaining the process to him (Estrada). He stated that my grandfather would need to pay him 150 pesos before he left and then would be required to pay another 150 pesos to the person that picked him up when he arrived in the United States (Estrada). He said he would need to leave exactly twelve days after their meeting because that is when the other coyote would come (Estrada). My grandpa said he was not expecting to leave so soon and felt so overwhelmed. His family did not know he was planning to come, but in his heart he knew he had too. "Ya era el momento que decidi qué quese futuro mejor hija, para mis hijos y para mis nietos. Mis hermanos ya pensaban que tienian todo, pero yo sabia que habia mas para mi. Y eso es la cosa. Todo el mundo piense que queremos dejar nuestro culturo, nuestro familia, pero sabemos que si queremos algo más, algo mejor, nos tenemos

que ir” (“It was in that moment that I had to decide I wanted a better future for my children and for my eventual grandchildren. My siblings had settled, they believed they had all they needed in Mexico, but I knew there had to be more for me. And that’s the thing. The world thinks we want to leave our culture, our families, but we know that if we want something more, something better, we have to go”) (Estrada).

“Y luego, explicame porque viniste. Que buscabas?”, I asked my grandfather (“Well, explain to me why you decided to come. What were you looking for?”). I had reminded him that he earlier in our conversation had kept alluding to something ‘better’. He kept mentioning that he wanted to come for this particular future, but I wanted to know exactly what that meant. “Más de nada, siempre estuve tan curiosos de vida fuera de México, y luego tuve familia y supe en ese momento que lo tenia que hacer”, he said to me such confidence, almost as if it was such a simple decision (“More than anything, I was always so curious about what life was like outside of Mexico, and then I had a family and I knew in that moment I needed to do it”) (Estrada). My grandfather insisted that Mexico was his home, it was beautiful and was his “Mexico, lindo y querido”, but, for him, it was no place to achieve something meaningful. (“Mexico, beautiful and beloved”) (Estrada).

Research done by Kelly Lytle Hernandez, a historian and professor of Chicano studies research at UCLA, indicated that in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s a global recession hit Mexico and that “the economy experienced zero per capita growth, real wages fell, and underemployment plagued 45 percent of the economically active population” which resulted in an increase immigration as a result of economic survival (Hernandez). So, much like my grandfathers story, it was difficult to have a sense of financial security, which was a factor that motivated his migration My grandfather seemed to love the *idea* of the United States. A place where anyone could earn a wage and because he had always been disciplined to work hard, he believed he could do this in the United States (Estrada).

The day came and my grandpa was ready to begin crossing, which would turn out to take a little less than two months (Estrada). He left around Christmas and did not arrive until much after the New

Year (Estrada). The year was now 1967 and my grandfather was 27. He was told from Salomon that he could not bring anything, which my grandpa said was not a problem for him because he did not have much regardless (Estrada). My grandpa was coming without my grandma, or his children. He said the reason for this was because he was going to find work and a place to live and once he had settled and had a steady and reliable source of income, they would come over (Estrada). My grandfather went to the same location he had when originally meeting Salomon. Once he arrived he said that he met six others. Five men, four of whom were also looking to go to the United States and one was another coyote (Estrada). He also met one woman who was from Durango, a state close to Mexico City (Estrada). He said that Salomon stressed that the journey was going to be difficult and long, but that once they were on their way they would not turn back because they would be likely to get caught. “Me dijo que iba estar bien, bien difícil, y que teníamos que acordar de por que íbamos ir”, my grandpa told me of Solomon (He told me it was going to be very very difficult, but that we had to remind ourselves constantly why we were going”) (Estrada).

My grandpa said they began by walking “lo que sentía como cientos millas” and after that they got on a semi truck and all sat in the back (“What felt like hundreds of miles”) (Estrada). My grandfather said no one talked much, which he did not have a problem with (Estrada). He has always been so giving and friendly, but stressed to me that the emotions he felt during this time made him not want to talk to anyone else (Estrada). He said he had three big fears, “que me llevaba inmigración, que me mataron los carteles, o que me mandaban patras a México” and that while he tried to remind himself why he was going, for this better future, like Salomon told them to, he could not ever *only* think of that (“that immigration would catch me, that cartels would kill me, or that they would send me back to Mexico and I would have to do it all over again”) (Estrada). He then mentioned to me that he had heard of the Bracero Program and that he knew it had ended recently and worried that this meant they would crack down on immigration (Estrada).

My grandfather said the majority of the time they were in the back of a semi truck and they would stop at times so the drivers could get them some food and water (Estrada). They also spent miles and miles walking and a few times my grandfather, or other people who were crossing, shoes would fall apart and this meant they would either walk with broken shoes or barefoot (Estrada). My grandpa mentioned the few times they stopped were very intentional and that whenever they did it was always at a home (Estrada). At this point, coyotes would have a place to make sure everything was going as planned and would gather things that they may need (Estrada). These houses would always have other coyotes and they would have a change of clothes and food for the people who were crossing. My grandpa said they would not stop often, but when they did it was such a relief to everyone (Estrada).

When they finally arrived at the border, my grandpa said everyone was really fearful and that “este era el momento que yo esperaba...ni supe cómo sentir porque tuve tantas emociones” (“this was the moment that I waited for...I did not know exactly how to feel because I had so many emotions all coming over me at once”) (Estrada). My grandpa said that the coyotes had mentioned to them if there was a lot of traffic, Border Patrol would at times let them go without checking (Estrada). However, this time was different. Border Patrol began asking routine questions to the drivers, why they were crossing and if they had family in the United States (Estrada). My grandpa said then they walked to the back of the semi and opened up the back door (Estrada). When they opened it, everyone froze and the women who they were crossing over with began crying immediately. As my grandfather and I were talking he told me, “puedo acordarme tan claramente de cómo la señora empezó a llorar. Lloro tan tranquilamente como no tenía ganas de nada. Eso es uno de las cosas que me acuerdo de mas” and in that moment I realize my grandfather got more emotional than he had since the time we began talking (“I can remember so clearly what the women looked like when she began crying, Her cry was so quiet like she was so drained and had no will anymore”) (Estrada).

After he told me this, he reminded me no one had ever asked him about his journey, and while it may not be something he likes to talk about, it's something that happened and he has never allowed himself the time to talk about it or even process through all that happened (Estrada). While I wanted to continue to ask my grandpa a million questions, I realized that this was not something he had emotionally overcome yet. So, I sat and listened to him tell me whatever he felt comfortable talking about. I assured him “nadamas dime lo que sientes comfortable con, abuelo” and wanted him to know that I was not simply looking to fulfill requirements for an assignment, but to really listen to his experience and my family's history (“only tell me the things you feel most comfortable sharing, grandpa”) (Estrada). He then went back to telling me the rest of the story, “tu pensabas que era el final del historia, pero claro que no porque aquí estoy” he stated while laughing (“you would think that was the end of the story, like I did, but clearly it was not because here I am”) (Estrada). “Puedes crear que nos dejaron ir”, he said while still laughing (“Can you believe they let us go?”) (Estrada). My grandpa then proceeded to continue to mention the situation while still chuckling and said, “Nos dijo ‘bueno suerte’ y no lo podia crear. Ni nos puegutaton nada. Yo pienso que pensabas que te iba decir algo diferente, pero eso es lo que paso. Me lo tienes que crear. Tan suerte que tengo, verde?” (“They told us ‘good luck’ and I could not believe it. They did not even question us. I think that you were expecting something else so different, but that is what happened. You have to believe me. I have such good luck, right?”) (Estrada).

My grandfather then told me that eventually after the New Year he had ended up in Joliet, Illinois (Estrada). That he had literally arrived with nothing but the clothes on his back (Estrada). The coyotes took them to another apartment where tons of people were sleeping, eating, and talking only Spanish (Estrada). The coyote told my grandpa and the rest of the people he came with they were allowed to stay here until they found a place (Estrada). He assured me he had no intention of staying there with everyone and immediately that same day went to look for work (Estrada). My grandfather eagerly told me “Mira hija, no te lo vas a crear pero ese primer día que fue a buscarme un trabajo encontré una en un

factoria. Empece la proxima dia” (“Listen daughter, you are not going to believe me, but that first day I went to look for a job and I found one in a factory. I began the next day”) (Estrada). My grandpa told me it was a factory that created parts for cars and it reminded him of home when he would go to school and then go to the auto shop to work on cars (Estrada). He said there was tons of undocumented immigrants at this job and also in his neighborhood (Estrada). While he knew he was not at home, he also knew that he could find some community where he was (Estrada).

That was something he was most thankful for when he arrived, he told me. He had feared losing his culture, and was thankful he was in a community where he could hear his music and language on the street (Estrada). At my grandfather's job, he said he got paid 2.20 an hour (Estrada). Immediately, I stopped him mid story and gasped. I could not imagine how he could live off that at all, especially if he was trying to achieve some level of comfortability so that the rest of my family could join him. He assured me that things were significantly less expensive at that time and that he was able to buy a gallon of milk for a quarter (Estrada). For years, my grandfather worked that job and another job where he earned a bit more money. Later, in '69, my grandmother came with my aunt Mireya. One year after that in '70, my uncles Cesar and Juan Carlos also came.

To end my interview, I asked my grandfather how he felt over 50 years later. Did he find what he was looking for? Is he happy with his decision? His response was emotional, but spoke volumes about what the fight is about. “Pues, extraño mi tierra, mi familia, extraño a México siempre...pero lo hice por ti mija, tu educación, por todo lo que vas hacer en este vida. En mi vida no lo puedo hacer, pero ahora tienes un diferente historia.” (“Well, I miss my land, my family, I miss Mexico all the time... but I did it for you, for your education, for everything you will go on to accomplish. In my life, I was not able to do it, but you now have a different story”) (Estrada). In that moment I realized, there it was, that silver lining we are always finding.

My grandfather, now of old age, lives with me, my parents, and my brother. He is almost completely bald now, and the little hair he does have is white. He uses a cane, but claims that he could walk without it, even though I know that is not true. As we ended the conversation and I listened to my grandfather get emotional about his experiences, I reflected a lot. I am the first person in my family to go on to college. I have learned to take a firm stance in my opinions and beliefs. To be comfortable with engaging in conversations about politics, race, and immigration because now is *my* time to fight for my family, to fight for my grandfather.

In the south side neighborhood of Chicago, Little Village, a predominantly Mexican, undocumented, and working class neighborhood there are often protests and demonstrations. I recently read about a demonstration after the 2017 election that was focused on undocumented immigrant rights and I talked to my grandfather about it. As we were discussing, I told him about an older Latino man who proudly held a sign that read “Gracias jóvenes por gritar lo que tus abuelos y yo callamos por miedo” and it reminded me of my grandfather and how he fought for me to do exactly what I am doing and now, it is my time to fight for him (“Thank you young people for speaking up about what I and your grandparents stayed quiet about out of fear”).

That older man proved to me that he, despite the difficulties, was still fighting the fight. That my grandfather, despite his struggles, was still ready to demand justice and peace for our community. As Enriqueta Longeaux Y Vasquez stated in her piece, *The Women of La Raza*, “Roles are for people living the examples of social change...we must have a total liberation. We must look at our children as belonging to all of us. We must strive for fulfillment of all as equals, with full capability and right to develop a humans” (Longoaux Y Vasquez).

My grandfather, Juan, gave me exactly what I was looking for. Here was the story about the struggle *and* the triumph. I sit at a university with the abilities and privileges never awarded to those who paved this path for me. I am part of that triumph, I am part of the success my grandfather had in coming

to the United States, an experience so terrifying, yet clearly rewarding for me. I am lucky enough to be able to sit with my grandfather and speak to him about stories that are so passionate and inspirational. With this moment, I take the connection I have to to generations of communities I do not know, but I share experiences with. I take the want for more because I understand the sacrifice it took to get here, and above anything, I take with me the unimaginable power of love and resistance. Dreams and hopes have no border, our commitment to understanding the experiences of others and their needs must drive us all to connect with those that are different, and like me, those that are the same but are often silenced- the power storytelling and community building pride in oneself is worth it.