

6 *A Life Story to Take across the Border: Notes on an Exchange*

For the past five years I have been working on the life story of Esperanza Hernández, a Mexican woman who lives in a rural town a half-hour away from the city of San Luis Potosí. Esperanza is self-employed as a farmer, peddler, and occasional domestic servant. Our work together has developed in stages. The first stage involved the formation of our relationship as co-mothers (*comadres*), which did not occur immediately on my arrival in the town in 1982 but rather took until 1985 to develop, after which we became good friends. In the second stage of our work, after Esperanza initiated our relationship as *comadres*, we began to meet together for late-night kitchen conversations to produce an account of her life story. In the most recent stage, we have been exploring the possibilities and contradictions of the work itself and of our own relationship.

This chapter is about the most recent stage of mutual questioning, which has thrown into relief the cleavages of privilege and class that separate us. Earlier feminist thinking sought to assert claims of sisterhood among distant women. Marjorie Shostak (1981) described Nisa, the !Kung woman whose life history becomes an allegory of female sexual liberation, as a "distant sister." But as the dubiousness of such sisterhood began to be exposed, many feminist researchers began to worry, as did Judith Stacey (1988), that there could be no fully feminist ethnography amid the many unresolvable separations between the women doing the research and the women being researched. More recently, feminist ethnographers have been looking for ways to write ethnography in such a way that the differences among women can be spoken about without signaling the impossibility of mutual understanding (Visweswaran, 1992). I locate this study within this newly emerging perspective, as an ongoing set of "notes on an exchange" between two very differently situated women who have come together for very different reasons to produce a hybrid text.

Before I knew her, I had learned from various other women that Esperanza had

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bewitched her former husband, Julio, after he left her and returned to town with another woman and their children. During their marriage, he had abused and beaten her. Cursing him, according to one story, with the words "So that you will never again see women," she had caused him, possibly by using magical powers, to go suddenly blind. That women have supernatural powers to hurt the men who wrong them is a long-standing cultural theme in Mexican society, so the assertion that Esperanza had bewitched Julio need not have reflected badly on her. But Esperanza, I was told, was a bad-tempered, sharp-tongued, combative woman whom one had to take care not to offend. Both she and her mother were reputed to be witches. It was clear that class divisions in the town also informed this portrait. Esperanza is from the lowest rung in the social ladder, a single mother and a working woman. What is particularly offensive about her, I suspect, is that she does not act like a woman of her class: she is neither demure nor defeated.

Without my fully realizing it, the rumors I had heard about her had affected me. I did not seek her out as I did some other women. Nor did I run into her much in my daily walks through the town. Esperanza deliberately restricts her movements, leaving her house only to work her plot of land and on her thrice-weekly trips to the city to sell vegetables, fruits, and flowers door-to-door. In part this is because of the cultural practice of restricting women to the domestic space of the home, which Esperanza has interpreted strictly, but it is also the result of her sense that she is a marginal person and not fully an occupant of those town streets, in which she refuses to be seen except when absolutely necessary. Our talks together were always conducted in the secrecy of night, and when Esperanza would leave, she always covered her face with her shawl.

My first encounter with Esperanza took place on the Day of the Dead in 1983, in the cemetery, where I had spent the day taking photographs. Holding a bouquet of calla lilies, she looked striking, almost like something out of one of Diego Rivera's Indian nativist canvases. As I drew closer I asked if I might photograph her. She looked at me haughtily and asked me in turn, with a brusqueness I had not encountered before among local women, *why* I wanted to take her picture. I made some weak reply, and she let me photograph her, though I was so nervous that I snapped the last picture in the roll (which didn't come out) and moved on, certain that I would have little to do with her.

I think that many of the contradictions of my work with Esperanza were already evident in that first encounter. I had fastened on her as an alluring image of Mexican womanhood, ready to do my own upper-class, exoticizing portrait of her; but the image had spoken back to me, questioning my project and making it impossible for me to carry it out.

I did not speak to her again until December of the following year, when I saw her in church on the festival day for the Virgin of Guadalupe. I had been away from the town for a few months and, excited to be back, was offering greetings with greater cheer than usual. I found the nerve to greet Esperanza and chat with her briefly, and she clearly took this as a sign of my readiness to initiate a relationship. Later

that week she knocked at our door to ask if my husband and I would be godparents for the cake for her daughter's coming-of-age party (*quinceañera*), to which we agreed. Several days later she came and asked us to become the godparents of her Christ child, a doll that is used in the yearly home Christmas festivities. These requests seemed to me at the time to come out of the blue. Only later did I learn that she had been observing us carefully, noting the way—unlike town elites—we spoke to everyone, rich and poor alike. And she had learned that we had become the godparents of a little girl born to a poor single mother in the town; she had been moved to see me caress the child one day as I met her on the street. Her observations had led her to think that we were good people and would not shun her efforts to initiate a relationship.

By agreeing to these requests, my husband and I became *compadres*, spiritual coparents of her daughter and her Christ child. She and I would from then on address each other as comadre and participate in the particular form of close but respectful friendship and mixture of patronage and reciprocity that goes with being *compadres*. A *compadrazgo* relation in rural Mexico is typically forged between persons of high and low economic standing; as the better-off person in my relation with Esperanza, I would be expected to offer financial or other assistance if she requested it. At the same time, she would be expected to offer me small gifts from time to time—say, of produce from her field—and to act with extreme courtesy whenever we met.

Yet initially I was not quite sure how to interpret Esperanza's actions. When she asked us to serve as godparents to her Christ child I felt suspicious, uncertain of this assertive "informant" who seemed to demand rather than request favors. She told us, for example, that her Christ child had fallen from the altar several times because he was upset at not having had his *acostada* ritual; therefore, could we perform the ritual immediately? Both requests represented significant outlays of money from my husband and me. Obviously we could afford it, but we were still strangers to her. Why had she suddenly taken a liking to us? What other requests would follow? Had she just discovered that we were an easy source of funds? Where was the reciprocity in this relationship? When we performed the ritual for her Christ child we felt suspicious enough that we bought only the minimum—the crocheted outfit for the doll and some treats for the guests—but skimmed on the oranges and did not bring a piñata. I remember feeling the sense of disappointment; the gringos, merely students yet richer than anyone there, had been cheap.

Later, of course, I regretted my actions. I had no idea then of the story Esperanza had to tell of her life or of the work we would do together. I had not yet gone beyond the twin images I had of her: the romantic image of the intense Indian woman with the calla lilies versus the "uncooperative informant" and pushy, witchy woman I had been warned to stay away from. Only as I got to know Esperanza did I realize that our becoming comadres had allowed us, as differently situated women, to forge a relationship of mutual caring, reciprocity, and trust. This relationship made it possible for us to transcend our situatedness as *gringa*

and *mexicana* and relate to each other as equals of a sort. Esperanza's deference to me could thus be that of a comadre rather than that simply of a woman of a rural working-class background; and it meant that I too could be, had to be, deferential, offering the kind of formal respect—addressing her in the formal "you," shaking hands softly at every encounter—expected from me, in turn, as a comadre. By asking me to become her comadre Esperanza had opened up a terrain for our exchange.

After our participation in the two ritual events we began to see more of Esperanza. In her small, unlit cinder-block room she would tell me about herself and also tell gripping stories about encounters with the devil and other spirits. Even before I thought to tape-record her life story, she had told me, in compressed form, much of what would later find its way into the tapes. When I told Esperanza that I thought her life narrative would make a very good book, she completely agreed and took a certain pride in thinking that she alone of all the women in the town had a life worth turning into a text. Why? The answer, in her mind, was obvious: she had suffered. Suffering gave a woman the right, and the need, to write a text. Within her Catholic worldview and sense of narrative, it is by suffering and surviving, laughing through the tears, that a woman earns the privilege of telling her life. In her mind her living had earned her the right of telling—of inscribing her life.

In July 1985, when she came to our house in town for an evening chat, I asked if we could tape her story. I began by saying, "Comadre, I'd like you to tell me about your life. From your first memory." She was accompanied that night by her son and younger daughter, as she was for almost all our conversations. I had barely finished asking my question when Esperanza broke out in torrents of laughter. Her children laughed with her, amused by the hilarity I had provoked.

As the laughter died down Esperanza said, "Comadre, what a life, what a life I've had. No, my life is a very long history."

The persistent ethnographer, I replied, "No, well, tell me your history."

Esperanza laughed again. "Ay, comadre. Ay, the chewing gum is falling out of my mouth! No, my life has been very sad. Sad. Dark, dark. Like my mother's life. Look, do you want me to tell you from the time I was born?"

Unaware that this was a joke, I responded, "Yes."

There was more laughter. "I'm very scandalous about laughing, talking. My sister says to me, 'Ay, woman, what do you say? Laugh calmly. Laugh seriously. Calm down. You get too excited.' 'That's the way I am. You because you're bitter. Not me.' Despite the fact that I've had some dark times in my life."

The swallows that had built nests in the rafters of the courtyard suddenly flew around noisily. We stopped to listen. In the meantime I passed around sodas and cookies (as I would do at all later talks). After a pause Esperanza turned to me, suddenly serious. "Look, comadre, why would you like me to tell you about my life since childhood?"

I said, hoping to sound convincing, "It seems very interesting."

Esperanza was laughing again.

I added, encouragingly, "And you speak very well," and after a pause, "I like to hear you tell stories."

She still found this all quite funny. But she soon became serious and started. "Well, look. Since I was born, well, God knows. My mother says that I was born at three in the afternoon, behind the grinding stone. When my mother was— Because my mother went with my father to a ranch, there in La Campana."

With these words and what seemed an unpromising beginning we embarked on a series of conversations over several evenings in which Esperanza told the "long history" of her life, episode by episode. As this extract from our first conversation shows, Esperanza found humorous my sincere and determined efforts to get her to tell her story; though she wanted to tell me her story and had, in her perception, a sad story to tell, she refused—and still refuses—to approach her life with anything less than a burst of Rabelaisian humor. This laughter is, in a sense, her critique, too, of my academic pretensions: the way in which I find things "interesting" and cajole her and pounce on her so that she will talk and tell me more. That I should want to take her life seriously strikes her as comical in terms of the inversions of social position and hierarchy that it also suggests: an educated, obviously middle-class gringa asking an unschooled Mexican woman of the rural working class to tell her life story. Within the strict hierarchy of race and class in Mexico, and from Esperanza's perspective as someone on the lower fringes of the hierarchy, our interaction continues to amuse and amaze her, seeming somewhat unreal. So embedded is her sense of racial and class domination that she has asked me if I am not embarrassed to be seen with her. Our relationship as comadres cannot totally erase the fundamental ironies and contradictions of our work together.

As she told me her story, pushing it into my hands and stuffing it into my ears so I could take it back across the border, I began to realize that she wanted me to vindicate her life in a way that no one else, except a priest with thirty hours to spare, could: by listening to her version of her story and passing it on so that eventually it might be heard in the court of divine justice. She presented herself as a woman who was wronged and whom God, judging well and knowing her faith, has helped to find some degree of justice and triumph. Indeed, Esperanza describes her story, at the end of our conversations in 1985, as a confession that she has made to me, her comadre, rather than to the priest, and tells me that my task is to get rid of the sins that she has burdened me with by passing on her story to someone else, in the same endless discursivity with which priests confess people, bishops confess priests, archbishops confess bishops, and all the way on up to God. As she put it, "I have made a confession. . . . Now I should confess with the priest. . . . Now you carry my sins . . . because it is as if I have been confessing with my comadre, instead of with the priest. You will carry my sins now, because you carry them in your head. Priests confess people, right? . . . Then they confess

to the bishops . . . And the bishops, with whom? With the archbishops. And the archbishops, with whom? With God! Now you, comadre, who are you going to get rid of them with? You tell them somewhere ahead so someone else can carry the burden."

The dialogic construction of her life story has become for her a means of mending the splits in her public and private selves. In Mexquitic, she knows she will always be an outcast, an angry woman abandoned by her husband, whose rage exploded in witchcraft; and she will always be a woman of her class, a poor working woman, marketing on the fringes of the capitalist economy, and a fallen woman who has alone raised three children out of wedlock. But who in Mexquitic knows or cares to know the spiritual chronicle of her soul's journey? To whom can she confess but to a stranger? In small village parishes it has long been customary for foreign priests to hear confessions at Easter; they have less at stake than the parish priest and, having confessed you, they leave. Esperanza has placed me in the position of the visiting priest. Telling me her life story becomes a means of seeking absolution. Giving me her story to take back across the border to the mysterious and powerful "other side" (*el otro lado*, as the United States are referred to by working-class Mexicans) offers the possibility not only of sending her "sins" forward but also of a rebirth in this life: a rebirth in the text about her life that strangers in a strange country will read.

Her narrative, as she herself defines it, is ultimately an examination of the Christian soul through its inscription in one of the oldest forms of autobiography: the confession. While she has not, in fact, confessed to a priest nor taken communion since her marriage in 1949, she has told me her "sins" so that I might free her of this "burden" in that other world across the border, a spatial divide that is as vivid for rural Mexicans as that separating this life and the next.

On the basis of the first conversations from 1985 and some briefer conversations from 1987, I wrote an essay detailing the key themes in Esperanza's life story as she presented it (Behar, 1990). Thus I became, as she foresaw, a storyteller myself, selecting the parts of her story I would highlight, finding the places where I needed to interrupt the text to interpret a point for my academic readers, and honing the different, but sometimes meshing, tones of her voice and mine. When I returned to Mexquitic in the summer of 1988 I found myself in the interesting situation of retelling Esperanza's story to her as I tried to explain how I was organizing the book that by then I had planned to write based on our conversations. I wanted very much to hear her comments on what I was doing and get some sense of whether she approved of the project. This more recent stage of our work together—the talking about the work we have done and the uses to which it will be put—is what I want to focus on here. Thus I will discuss Esperanza's life story only indirectly, turning my attention instead to what could be called the terms of the exchange by which I have obtained the story in the first place.

Curled around the kitchen table, where we had just been talking about a sexual

joke she had told me that I had pleaded with her to repeat into the tape, she paused and said, quizzically, "My comadre [speaking of me] says this is very interesting. Does this seem very interesting to you?"

"Yes," I answered.

"And you're going to write this down and turn it into a history?"

"Well, not all of it, some parts. Would you like to see how I'm writing it?"

"Let's see."

I turned to my husband, David, and asked in English, "Can you bring what I have in the— It's in the study room. On my desk. The outline and the—"

As we waited for David to return, Esperanza said cryptically, "I just want to see how you're writing it, but don't tell me."

"No, I'll show it to you," I replied. "Because you said that in the book you want me to call you Esperanza, right? Isn't that true? Didn't you say not to use your real name, but use Esperanza, which is your second name?"

"My second name. I am Benigno and Esperanza."

"Esperanza," I repeated softly.

Laughing, she said, "The only *esperanza* [hope]. Ay, ay, ay! No, comadre, how are you going to do it? How are you going to do that history?"

"I'll show you. So far I have not used your other name, but when I write it to publish it, I can use that name instead, if you like."

"Comadre, and that? You are going to put it together over there, or you're putting it together here? And are you going to go around with all the women here in Mexquitic and talk?"

"No, no, no, let me show you."

"Well, no, that's why I said, no. Here they'll make fun of me."

"They wouldn't make fun. Why?"

"No, yes they would, if you were to go around talking to them. Well, that lady who is my comadre, that this and that and the other. Ay!"

"Well, no, whatever you say, I won't talk to them. If you don't want me to say anything to them, I won't. I won't say anything."

"No, nothing."

"Only there, where it will be published in English."

"Well that's up to all of you there. It's up to all of you, after all."

"For the people on the other side."

Laughing, she replied, "The other side. Here we say 'the other side of what?' The other side of the river! Well, yes, the other side of the river, don't you see that there's a river there?"

"And what do you think, does it seem all right to you that people on the other side read your history? Does that seem all right to you?"

"Well, I don't know. Over there I don't know them and they don't know me. Well, if you tell them: this, that, and the other. And will they like that? They won't, will they?"

"No, why not?"

"I say that they won't. That life isn't right— It's a life that's very, very— What do I want to say? Well, sad, very, yes—or very ridiculous!"

"No, comadre."

"I don't know what. Eh? There's a saying, eyes that don't see, heart that doesn't feel. What do you think?" And after a pause, "And this book, you're going to give it to people there to read, or what?"

"Well, first, when it's written, after it's published; we'll see if people are interested in reading it. This is what we don't know, if anyone will be interested or not. It's chancy. But I think so."

"Ay, comadre, why are you using up your life on this?" She laughed. "Wracking your brain and struggling doing this. Well, if you think that this might be worth it for you over there, well then it's up to you. Right? But I say that here, no. No, here, no."

"Not here. And not in Mexico City, either, right? There, far away, in the city?"

"And then what if they bring the books here? You see how that lady showed me that about the young man who ended up in prison. He ended up in prison, and she says that his histories are now sold in San Luis. But that they happened in Mexico City."

"That young man, he entered as a young man and came out when he was sixty years old. He did his history. And he's in photographs, too. There he is in the book—like in a caricature, and very, very ugly. And I said to the lady, 'Well, but he did it.' And she says, 'Yes, he did it himself. About his life, what he went through.' And she says, 'It's interesting. It's nice. I'd lend it to you, but it's old.' And she showed it to me like that. The binding was already breaking. It's that thick. And I said to her, 'And where is he from?' 'From Mexico City.' That's where it happened to that young man. And he came out when he was sixty, an old man. An old man, because he's already sixty. And I'm entering my sixtieth year. Next year I'll be sixty."

That such a life story could be turned into a book had evidently impressed Esperanza and led her to wonder about the book I would produce about her. I realized that in this conversation we were negotiating both the terms by which I would be able to use her story and the terrain on which it could be made public: who should hear it, who should not, and where and why. She has given me her story on the condition that it remain secret in Mexquitic and in Mexico generally, for fear of the gossip she feels certain would ensue if others—especially other women—saw her story in a book. She means for her story to be told elsewhere, where no one knows her; at home, where people maintain closely guarded boundaries around their private identities and domestic space, she would be ridiculed for indulging in such a "confession" with her gringa comadre. Just as rural Mexican laborers export their bodies to work on American soil, Esperanza has given me her story for export only.

I said, "Then you'd like only for people in the United States to read it—your history? Here in Mexico no one should know of it?"

"No. Because from there they'll send some here. Or those histories that they turn into books, those are the ones they send us here, or do they come from far away? I don't know. Like all those books they sell in San Luis, there are many of them, histories, who knows what."

"Yes."

"That's right. And then you, what will you do? How will you do it in Mexico City? From there I think they'll send them here. No, comadre, no, no!"

"I'm going to write it in English. And this way we'll publish it there. For people on the other side to learn about your life."

"Ay, yes. So is it going to be like that man's, that young man's? Is that what it's going to be?"

"Something like that, but it will be told in your words. Because you've been telling it to me."

"Yes, like that young man. Because the lady said, 'Look, here it says everything.' And I said, 'What does it say?' 'What he did, what he went through in life and everything. He wrote all of that, he did his history.' I say that's what this might be, or will be." Pointing to the stack of papers in my hand, which David had brought in from the next room, she asked, "And what's that you have there?"

Showing her my book outline, I said, "Well, this is an idea of what I'm going to write. The first chapter will be like an introduction. About the way I am reading your history, the way I understand it. I'm going to explain how we met, and the way you used to come to the house to tell your history. In other words, the way I came to have this history."

"Yes, yes."

"And then, the second chapter, I'm going to explain a little bit what you say at the beginning about the way you lived the same life as your mother. That's what you told me at the beginning. That you saw what your mother suffered and then you lived the same life. [She left an abusive husband just as Esperanza did, raising her children alone.] Then the third chapter will be about your life as a worker. In other words, the way you went to work in the cotton harvest, which you told me about."

"That was a lot of suffering."

"And then the way you started to work in San Luis."

"When my father took me to the Lagunera fields. I remember. Oh, what suffering. On the way there, really. He took me there twice. Then he no longer took us there. And then afterward my mother and us left my father because my father was going to kill my mother. My mother tried to get away that night. And that was the history of that. . . . A lady in San Luis said to me, 'It's that your life is like a history.' And I said, 'Yes, that's right. I never finish. I never finish telling it.'"

"And then about the way you worked in San Luis also [as a domestic servant]. And the next chapter I call, 'The Cross of the White Wedding Dress.'"

"Yes, that I got married."

"When you got married. And the next one is about *coraje* [anger], it's about corajes."

Laughing a bit, "Because of my children."

"And your husband. You talked about how a little girl or boy of yours died from a coraje that you suffered." [Her anger suffused her breast milk, turning it into a deadly potion.]

"Almost all of them died, I don't know if because of coraje. Yes, they died. But all were badly taken care of, they would get sick and with my corajes— And this isn't even everything I have to tell. The parts I forgot. A lot. During sixteen years."

"And then about the time your mother became ill. The evil illness. [She was bewitched by Esperanza's mother-in-law after she took in Esperanza and her children.] Then another chapter called '*Marchanta*,' about the way you became a *marchanta* [marketing woman]."

"Ay, about the way I went to sell."

"Then 'Sons and Daughters.' It's about your sons and daughters. And the next one, that's complicated, it's about money cancer, justice. You've sometimes said that 'you pay for everything in this life.' I try to explain that too, that idea."

Esperanza starts laughing. "Don't tell me they don't know that there!" Her children laugh, too. "How are they not going to know that there?"

"They don't know that there," I say.

"Don't tell me they don't know how to swear? They don't even know how to swear or curse?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, then, I think that this, too, those jokes they also know. A joke meaning that here one knows that you pay for everything in life. Sooner or later you pay for everything. If you believe— Let's suppose that one believes in God, right? Well, one says why do anything more, let's leave those things to God and he'll know how. Sooner or later one pays. For one thing or another, and that's it. That's the saying we have."

"That you pay for everything, or that God is the one who makes everyone—"

"Well, of course. As I told you, that lady, that Santos, told me to do that harm [witchcraft] to Julio [her former husband]. Because she knew how, right? And she'd show me. And I said, 'No, why?' I said, 'The only thing is that sooner or later he'll have to pay, and with God's help those sins will be well paid for, sooner or later. Why should I do harm to him?' Then when she said to me, 'Hum, from now until God decides—' No, why should I try to do it? If I say yes, do the evil for me, why? If I do harm to him, then I too, what salvation can I expect from God? What I do say, softly, sooner or later he has to pay. That's for sure. Eh? Things left to God will be well paid. Eh? Easy. It didn't take long. He's already blind. Eh? That's why I say so. It's said that in this life you pay for everything, and what isn't paid is charged to your account." Esperanza laughs.

"And you pay in the next life?"

"Of course."

The economic discourse here—of accountability, of God as accountant and judge making sure we "pay" for sins—permeates Esperanza's thinking so thoroughly that she can't imagine this isn't an obvious fact. Thus I invoke exchange in this essay as part of the way Esperanza, who markets in the penny capitalism of a woman on the margins, sizes up the world. Given the opportunity to bewitch her husband by Doua Santos, a dealer in black magic, she refuses because she knows that God will take care of him, as indeed her husband's sudden blindness showed in its profound poetic justice—for he had been an incorrigible lecher, constantly eyeing women, eating them with his eyes. But, in her view, everyone must measure up before God. Esperanza went on to note that even *angelitos* (dead children) take some sins with them to the next world because of the *corajes* (anger) they have felt upon crying. "They, too, have to dip a foot in purgatory."

Our conversation having turned to the afterlife, I asked Esperanza, "Then you're not afraid of death?"

She answered immediately. "No, why? If it's destined, then why? Why should I say, 'Oh that I shouldn't have to die!' If God says, 'Let's go now,' I say, 'Let's go!'" She laughs. "They say that with a long life, long account. Think about it. Whoever lives more, sees more and knows more. Right? That's why they say, short life, short account. Long life, long account." There was a pause as she laughed again. "Well, what do you think, comadre? Just lies I'm telling you, right? You must think, that woman's stories are real lies."

Unable to respond to this comment, I asked, "And what did you think of my outline, the plan I've got?"

"It's just fine."

"It is? What would you like to add to it? Do you want to add anything to those chapters? Something I forgot, some part that—"

"No, it's going well."

Half-embarrassed, I ask a question that feels dumb as I say it. "And what would you like people in the United States to think when they read your story? What would you like them to think?"

"They're not going to believe it."

"They're not going to believe it," I mimic.

And David, almost asleep in his seat as the clock passes midnight, chimes, "I don't think so."

Esperanza breaks the nighttime stillness with a howl of laughter. "I don't think so," she repeats. We all start laughing. "How is it possible? I say that they won't believe it."

The view that her story will seem unbelievable to her unknown and unknowable potential American readers, and the subtle intimation that she has been telling me lies, not the true story of her life in any sense, are interesting insights into the

production of life history texts. I think it significant that Esperanza should focus on the unbelievability of the text we have produced together. She doesn't seem to believe totally that absolution is possible, that her clean comadre from clean America will truly be able to launder her story. Like the comic book novels about miracles that are so popular in working-class Mexico, and to which Esperanza is especially attached, there is almost a comic book miraculousness about the inducement that I, as redemptive ethnographer-priest, have offered in promising to produce a book about the unfolding story of her life.

Do I believe her story? Will other gringos believe it, too? With my power and privilege as an academic woman who can write and publish a book, I can set things right—but will I? Is this all too good to be true? To me, the ethnographer and stranger, Esperanza could offer a different story about herself than she could townspeople in Mexquitic. Yet this is a story that she firmly does not want townspeople to know. It is for export, intended for use far from its native land, where it will be translated and read in English, that impossible foreign tongue. Her narrative is unreal because it presents a private suffering and struggling self that clashes with the public self of the combative woman who doesn't know her place. Certainly no one would believe her version of her life story in Mexquitic. But will people believe her in the United States?

It is not just the text that is unreal in the sense of it being a construction, an imaginative reconstruction, a story imagining how a closely guarded inner life has been lived. My ability and privilege to duck in and out of my various identities, moving from one location to another as needed for my research, have lent an unreal quality to the fieldwork itself. Ethnographers have always voyaged out to find their subjects; what makes the "postmodern condition" different is the way one can voyage in and out of the fieldwork situation *during* the fieldwork. The fieldwork "site" ceases to be a unitary place; it is fragmented by the ethnographer's crosscutting movements. So too are the stories we derive from such fieldwork. To offer a representation of those stories it would seem we need to interrupt them, to keep them from becoming seamless, so as to render visible and audible the conditions of their making as the product of a relationship between differently situated tellers and listeners.

Four days before my conversation with Esperanza, I had gone to Sanborn's, a luxury department store for tourists and local elites, located in a new shopping mall at the edge of the city, in search of newspapers and magazines. I ended up spending 90,000 pesos (about forty-five dollars) on recently published books about Mexican women, history, and religion.

The next day I went marketing with Esperanza. From her garden she brought zucchini, garlic, chayotes, and peaches, and we took the bus into the city. Because she needs more vegetables to sell than just the ones she brings from her garden we stopped at the market to buy lettuce, cucumbers, zucchini, carrots, and chili peppers. She carried a large plastic shopping bag on her head and a heavy pail on

her arm. We made our journey through the city, stopping at one door and another, selling small amounts of her produce, sometimes on credit, to her regular clients, middle-class women who inevitably answered the door in their bathrobes. One of the women instructed her to return later and then gave her a bag of day-old tortillas and some *masa* (corn flour dough). Though not lacking for food, Esperanza took it gracefully. After walking from one end of the city to the other for an entire day, I figured that Esperanza had made about 5,000 pesos (just over two dollars); she said that if she had sold everything she would have made 8,000 pesos. The round-trip bus ride cost 1,000 pesos from these earnings. She is working to make two, three, or four dollars a day, I thought, and there I had just spent a minor fortune on some books in a store that would probably cast out Esperanza if she miraculously found her way there and even conceived of entering.

At every house we stopped, Esperanza would introduce me. "Today I come with someone. She's a comadre. She's from the United States. She's not from here. She wanted to come with me to see how I sell. She says it's good exercise for her." Some of the women seemed surprised, others suspicious, others not terribly interested. Esperanza said that people were staring at us as we walked down the street next to each other. "They see me as very *ranchera* [a ranch woman] and you, comadre, a *güera* [a fair-skinned woman] from the United States, following me." Rounding a corner she said that some men delivering bread could not take their eyes off us. "They were simply amazed."

At one house where Esperanza had a comadre whose family was from the Mexquitic area, we stopped to talk for two hours and were served *gorditas* (filled tortillas). Enedina, our host, had a lively wit, and she said that when she saw the latest film sequel to the Indian María series she had thought of us and Esperanza. The film is about a gringo couple who brings María to the United States to be their domestic servant; María's exploits made for hilarious comedy. Enedina remarked, "Imagine you and your husband taking your comadre back, it was like that." I was struck by the irony of the remark and what it suggested about my work with Esperanza: that her life story could cross the border with me, her American comadre, but that she could not make the crossing except as an undocumented domestic servant. She was making her crossing vicariously by allowing me to take her story back.

Later in the conversation Esperanza remarked that people liked us in Mexquitic. Enedina nodded, unsurprised. "In Mexquitic they don't say anything to you. You know, there are places where they don't want you. But not Mexquitic. No one says to you, Why are you here, what are you doing here?"

"You see," said Esperanza, "they [Mexicans] go to the other side. There they throw them out, treat them badly. They don't let them cross. They beat them or kill them. And all they want is to work."

"For you it's easy to cross, isn't it?" inquired Enedina.

This question was asked so often of us in Mexico that I was never able to forget

the fact of that fundamental asymmetry—determining who could cross easily with a few dollars tip, as we did, and who had to put their life on the line simply to find a little back-breaking work. The asymmetry had to do not only with our position as American and theirs as Mexican but also with the disjuncture in our socioeconomic positions. Fieldwork in Mexico was for me about the way class intersected with, and intercepted, cultural understanding.

"All of us inhabit an interdependent late-twentieth-century world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power, and domination," writes Renato Rosaldo (1989, 217). What happens when we bring such an insight to the production of life-history texts? I have tried to begin to answer that question here by presenting, dialogically, the ways in which Esperanza and I have sought to negotiate the transfers from our different locations. As Daphne Patai points out, the researcher who works on life-history texts plays the role of both capitalist and laborer. In the capitalist image, the entrepreneurial researcher seeks raw material from a "native informant" in order to produce a text. "It is the researcher who owns or has access to the means of production capable of transforming the spoken words into a commodity" (1988, 7). Yet, as Patai points out, the analogy is muddy because the researcher's labor creates the text by "turning spoken words into written ones, editing, translating if necessary, or studying and interpreting the stories" (*ibid.*). From this double-edged position, she suggests that life histories be collected and produced in such a way that they at least challenge rather than simply re-create "the structures of inequality that make other women serve as the subjects of our books" (*ibid.*).

As capitalist and laborer, I have both eagerly sought out Esperanza's story and turned it into a source of work for myself. As Esperanza remarks, I am "using up" my own life doing this work, but as she also recognizes this must somehow be worth it to me. And, as I have tried to suggest, this work is, in different and maybe more uncertain but also important ways, worth it to her. At this critical juncture, as Rosaldo and Patai among others urge, we need to start making the power relations that inform ethnographic work more central in our thinking and writing. Certainly, there is no escaping the fact that I will be composing the book about Esperanza's life and that this is a privilege and power—given her gender, color, class, and nationality—quite beyond her reach. But as the selections from our conversations suggest, even in situations of obvious inequality there is much to negotiate. Esperanza has the last word about how her story may be used and who may hear it, and she will be the one to decide what she wants and expects from our exchange. None of this can undo the structures of inequality that situate us differently. But by making the process of exchange through which we obtain stories of others across borders a key part of life-history writing, it may open up to us other ways of thinking about the contradictions that separate us from the subjects of our essays and books. If the contradictions become, from this new perspective, glaringly

obvious and absurd, perhaps we will also begin to think of how to mediate them. Life history, a venerable but as yet little theorized genre of ethnographic writing, offers a challenging form for working through the contradictions of cultural exchange at a moment when the fences of privilege are reaching Babelesque proportions, and borders, like that separating Mexico and the United States, are getting harder to cross from the "wrong" side.

In the space, then, of a couple of days in July 1988, I spent, by rural Mexican standards, a fortune on books at a luxury store, then accompanied Esperanza on her selling route through the city, where she sold handfuls of produce for pennies, and had, finally, a talk with her—which I inscribed on tape—negotiating the terms of the book I had yet to write about her life. I had crossed in and out of borders, buying books, talking about books, entering and exiting from different cultural-economic production zones at a speed that made things seem surreal. In the process I had learned from Esperanza that she had a double-sided view of what allowing her story to cross the border meant. On the one hand, she clearly sees the border as a liberating site for the construction and realization of a new, more positive, identity on "the other side," where people might view her sympathetically in light of her suffering and quest for justice and redemption. But, on the other hand, her remarks during the visit to her comadre in San Luis also showed that she thinks of the "other side" as a site for the political and psychological repression of Mexicans who seek nothing more than honest work. Crossing the border by means of her story offers a hope of liberation—the remaking of her self in her own image—but that hope is embedded in the understanding that the bodies of real Mexicans are treated harshly and cruelly in that same place where her other self can unfold. The terms of exchange, then, are not transparent nor easy for Esperanza, and they are not for me, either. And these terms of exchange are sedimented in the story itself, not only in what Esperanza has told me but in the very fact that what she has told me will be heard across the border.

I would be misrepresenting the terms of our exchange if I failed to say that Esperanza's textual border crossing, like that of Mexican laborers, also carries with it the hope of obtaining more prosaic things from "the other side." After our conversations in 1987 she asked me for a radio-tape recorder, and her youngest son wrote me several letters to remind me. When I gave it to her in 1987, she turned happily to her son and said, "Se nos concedió!" (We got our wish!); I felt like a fairy godmother. She wrapped up the recorder in her shawl, as though it were a baby, and promised not to let anyone know she had gotten it from me, for if the word got around there would surely be bad feelings among our other friends in the town. The following year her son wrote us to say that they would soon have electricity and that my comadre would like a television set. When I gave Esperanza the television set, she reacted in the same way she had before: "We got our wish!" And now the set sits on a small table in her bedroom next to her altar of religious images, protected from dust by a white crocheted cloth. In recent months

her son has written to let us know my comadre needs a motor to irrigate her field and that it costs over a million pesos; could we bring it in our car, he wants to know, on our next visit? These too are part of the things being exchanged in our work and in my crossings back and forth from my academic production plant to the terrain of storytelling and wishing across the border.

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