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Book Review

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Miroslava Chávez-García. *Migrant Longing: Letter Writing across the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*. 2018. David J. Weber Series in the New Borderlands History. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Despite the vast literature on US-Mexican migration, Miroslava Chávez-García finds her place on the bookshelf with a personal and engaging book, *Migrant Longing: Letter Writing across the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*. Largely relying on letters exchanged between her mother and father, she explores migrant experiences on both sides of the border in the second half of the twentieth century. In a refreshing and unique approach, Chávez-García examines the lives of her relatives who went to work in California and those who remained in Calvillo, Mexico (near Aguascalientes) and how they coped with the absence of their loved ones. Through the use of letters sent back and forth between couples, a father and son, and friends, Chavez-García introduces the reader to an intimate and hidden part of migration and cross-border experiences.

The first and second chapters follow José and Conchita as they lived on opposite sides of the border and their eventual union. In exploring José's life on the US side in Imperial Valley, Chávez-García points out how his status as a green card holder granted him opportunities that bracero workers did not have, such as the ability to travel to and from Mexico. While working in the US, he filled his leisure time by writing letters to Conchita, occasionally sending new letters before she had a chance to reply. On the other side of the border, Chávez-García details Conchita's life in the rural town of Calvillo. Conchita was a "vibrant, free-spirited woman" who enjoyed spending time with her friends and wanted to continue her education despite the gendered expectations to stay at home. When she found time in her busy life, she replied to José's letters. In these letters they wrote about music, films, the English language, and more, yet, as Chávez-García points out, Conchita did not seek to formalize their relationship, much to the dismay of José. Chávez-García highlights how Conchita's home life and familial pressure finally convinced her to marry José.

The third chapter shifts the focus to letters between José's father and brother, José Chaves Torres and Paco. Chávez-García uncovers another side of migration by examining the experiences of family members who stayed at home while their relatives migrated to the US. She acknowledges the

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longing migrants felt to return home, see their families, and embrace their partners. However, they lacked the money or time to make the journey. Chávez-García dispels the idea that migrants sought permanent residency in the US by showing that they preferred a circular migration: working in the US and returning to Mexico. However, many were unable to achieve this mobile lifestyle. For instance, Paco, who worked in the US, wanted to answer his father's plea for financial support but did not earn enough money to send, let alone to visit. As Chávez-García explains, migrants in the US faced economic difficulties that complicated their ability to return or send money.

Chapter four follows Paco's relationship with Chonita, Conchita's sister. Chávez-García demonstrates their failed relationship and the difficulties of maintaining a long-distance romance, despite the letter writing and use of a social migration network. Mexican migrants utilized a network of support to reach the US, find work, create community, and survive. Chávez-García shows how Paco and Chonita accessed this same network to keep tabs and acquire information on each another through *chisme* (gossip).

The final chapter details the experiences of Paco's friend, Rogelio Martínez Serna. In this chapter, Chávez-García expands her discussion on the broader social network on which migrants came to depend in order to access work, housing, and even companionship in the US. She also uses Martínez Serna's experiences as an example of how migrants came to perceive the US, imagining wealth, fancy cars, and frequent liaisons. However, Martínez Serna's experiences fell short of these luxurious expectations. In fact, although he reached California and found work, he failed to obtain a green card and the harsh working conditions forced him to return to Mexico.

Chávez-García's analysis of her family letters creates a unique narrative of the borderlands that takes the readers through personal, emotional, and intimate experiences while also tying in economic conditions in Mexico. Although letters form the core of Chávez-García's narrative, she expands her discussion to engage with national and international trends. She includes Mexican political and economic history to show how state policies supported or restricted migration by examining the Mexican Revolution, the Second World War, Mexican industrialization, and the Mexican Miracle. By placing her specific case study in a larger context, she acknowledges the national and international implications of migration. In addition, the experiences of these individuals show that migration is not only a top-down economic and political phenomenon, but also one influenced by personal choices. The transnational, national, and local considerations provide a more holistic picture of US-Mexican migration.

The one complication I find in the book lies in the discussion on the gendering of the male migrant. For instance, in her first chapter she claims that having a green card altered José's gendered identity, but her explanation seems to speak more to his political identity and possibilities as a green card holder. She might be implying that a green card allowed José to embody the traditionally masculine role as the financial earner with more ease compared to undocumented migrants. However, this remains unclear.

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Chávez-García has successfully managed the difficult task of working with such personal and intimate material. Her letters are rich in details and she does justice to them. All scholars should look to *Migrant Longing* as an example on how to engage with personal case studies and extract the historical value in them.

Fernando Amador II is a PhD student at Stony Brook University where he explores the overlap between identity and environment. His dissertation, tentatively titled "Absent Children: Identity and Landscape in Rural Mexico," explores the history of Temacapulín, a small town in Los Altos de Jalisco, Mexico, and how its residents have transformed themselves and their landscape. He earned his BA at Chapman University.
