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A Typical but Memorable Life of a Mexican Migrant

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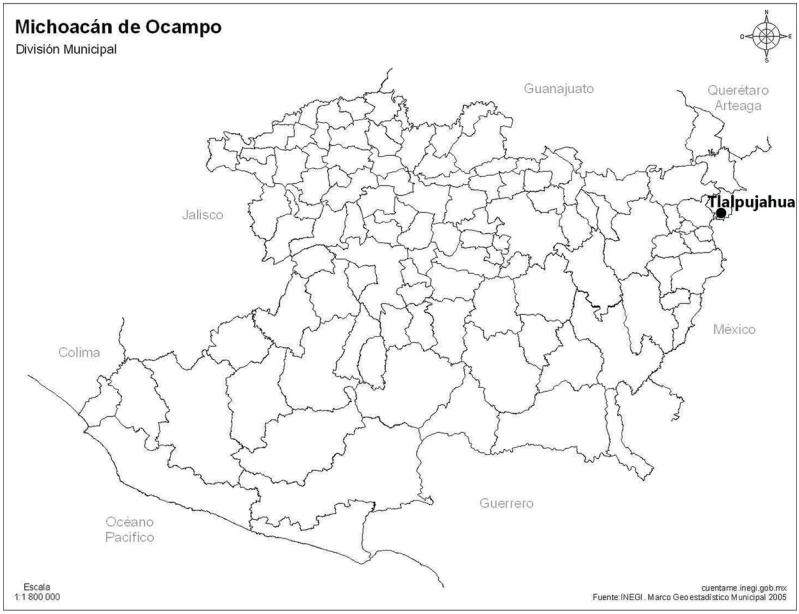
Abstract

Humans have been migrating up and down the North American continent for millennia. Ever since the Spanish Crown occupied Mexico and the American Southwest, hundreds of thousands of people of Mesoamerican heritage have also migrated throughout these regions to settle or work. *Don Magdaleno's Story: A Typical but Memorable Life of a Mexican Migrant* is the unique story of one of millions of Mexican migrants who have migrated to the United States over the last 125 years. His story tells of a Mexican migrant from the state of Michoacán who first came to the United States to Work as a Bracero during the Second World War, reentered countless times as an undocumented migrant in the late 1940s and 1950s, and finally settled with his family in the largest Mexican *Colonia* in San José in the 1960s. Don Magdaleno succeeded in moving back and forth between Mexico and the United States by relying on a host of Mesoamerican cultural practices, which enabled him to depend on fellow Mexican migrants or *Colonia* dwellers to survive wherever he was. Don Magdaleno attributed his successful journeys, as well as those where he failed, to his Mesoamerican cultural practices, such as seeking assistance from other compatriots, collaborating with them, and offering help to those in need. He applied the same strategies as he settled with his family in San José's Mexican *Colonias*.

Key words

Mesoamerican Civilizations, Memoir, Story-telling, Arriero, Bracero, Traquero, Mexican Colonias, El Paso, Texas, Operation Wetback, Alambrista, Transnational Migrants, Mexico de Afuera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Learning objectives

1. Identify and weave together the many stories that make up Don Magdaleno's story.
2. Narrate the emergence and roles of the *arriero*, *minero*, *bracero*, *pizcado*r, and t*raquero* as working histories of Greater Mexico.
3. Identify the various survival strategies employed by the working-class ethnic Mexican community.
4. Explain evidence of class consciousness in Don Magdaleno's stories.
5. Analyze the role of family and the strategies it adopts to ensure its survival in the ethnic Mexican community.
6. Analyze Don Magdaleno's migration experiences to the United States and distinguish between those and other Mexican migrants during WWII and later, especially more contemporary migrants coming from Mexico and other parts of Latin America.
7. Explain the role of the *Colonia* in the resilience of the ethnic Mexicans born in the United States and transnational Mexican migrants.

Prologue

Today, there is a growing trend among ethnic Mexican youth in the US to identify themselves as Latinos, Latinas, or Latinx. Certainly, American popular culture pressures them and other youth of Latin American extraction to identify themselves as Latinos or Latinas as a way of homogenizing them as a single ethnic group. Many Chicano intellectuals in universities have done the same in a belief that in the future, people of Latin American extraction will merge to create a new homogeneous ethnic group—Latinos—that will share a common language, a common history, and a single culture. This demographic and cultural revolution may happen, but then it may not. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement suggests that they are completely opposed to building a more equal and more just country, clearly indicating that a fairer multiethnic and multicultural America is still far away. In the desire to create a Latino people who are part of an integrated America, modern ethnic Latinos, including ethnic Mexicans, have become disconnected from their millenarian histories and cultures that early Indigenous peoples up and down the continent created. The disconnection of ethnic Latino youth, who are becoming atomized in American society, is truly a monstrous tragedy.

I started writing a biography of my father, Don Magdaleno Mora Rojas, as a way of remembering his life so that his descendants would not forget it. Along the way, I discovered that in writing

about my father's life, I was tapping into the millions of transnational migrants who had incredibly interesting stories, and yet, most of them have been lost to history. Hence, modern youth often have no idea of how they are linked to their ancestors and their ancestral culture. The process of writing my father's biography also got me into storytelling, the way by which preliterate people pass their stories, culture, and values to future generations. Throughout his life, my father told and retold stories about his own experiences, his family's history, community traditions, and historical events that had impacted him in one way or another. Don Magdaleno told the same stories at different times in his life, but he always repeated the same versions and employed the same exact language in telling them. It was as if he were following an ancestral formula for storytelling. Or maybe he was trying to capture the language of his time and the life of his community in the way that was most effective for him. For this reason, I have opted to pepper the book with a good number of the words that Don Magdaleno employed in everyday life. A glossary is provided in the book to give readers an English translation of the Spanish terms used in the book and the context in which they were used.

Don Magdaleno's physical appearance suggested that he had a lot of European blood in him to the point that when he was living in the United States, some people mistook him for Italian. What his physical appearance did not tell was that he was the lightest of all his siblings, and they exhibited the features of being mostly Indigenous. In fact, Mora family stories suggest that their ancestors were closely tied to Hacienda El Moral, which disappeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, there

are practically no physical remains of it, and only the name of the place survives. For Don Magdaleno, the origins of the Mora family could be traced to the Hacienda El Moral, and he frequently pointed out that nothing good came out of this experience. Perhaps because he was influenced by the ideology of the Mexican Revolution and President Lazaro Cardenas, the hero of land reform, Don Magdaleno regarded the haciendas as places that exploited, oppressed, and repressed his people. Again, he insisted that nothing good came from the haciendas!

What Don Magdaleno could not comprehend was that his family history extended far back, long before the appearance of haciendas. Yet, like most Mexicans, he was manipulated to believe the claim made by Mexican cultural elites and Mexico's rulers that modern Mexico had its roots in Western forms of economic development as well as cultural ties to Europe. Anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, however, challenged and rejected these claims, arguing that the image of Westernized Mexico was a mere façade. Bonfil Batalla instead postulated that the real roots of modern Mexico lay in the thousands of years-old Mesoamerican civilizations. Don Magdaleno was aware of the great civilizations that existed before the arrival of Europeans in Mexico, but he could not fully comprehend the history, traditions, values, and way of life that these civilizations had developed. Yet, Don Magdaleno did not realize that he, in fact, unknowingly had learned and integrated much of the Mesoamerican knowledge into his life. He was also unaware that his Mesoamerican way of telling and retelling his stories was an effective way of passing on his ancestral knowledge to future generations. In a way, Don Magdaleno helped to recover his people's history by recording it.

Don Magdaleno, from an early age, recognized that the Mesoamerican *milpa* was crucial to the survival of his family and community. He learned to take care of it and consider it a sacred place because, without its crops, his family's food security was threatened. He also learned that it was the obligation of each community member to care for the *milpas*, whether their own or those of their neighbors. Don Magdaleno internalized the belief that community members had obligations toward one another to ensure the survival of the entire community. He understood the purpose of the *tequio,* which he referred to as *faena*, in making improvements to the *milpas*, roads, or other types of community infrastructure. Wherever he went, Don Magdaleno quickly recognized that if he wanted to be a part of a community, he owed services to it, especially if he wanted reciprocity from it. As a true Mesoamerican, Don Magdaleno felt the need to live in a community with others and knew that to do so, he had to assume obligations to it. In the Santa Clara Valley, he came to identify with the large *colonias***,** but he also contributed to the formation of smaller ones in his neighborhood. He was always willing to help his neighbors because that was what his culture expected him to do. There were a lot of other cultural expectations that determined his actions in his *pueblo*, during his migrant travels, and his new life in the United States.

Don Magdaleno also experienced community spirit while working in Dos Estrellas and later in the Euzkadi Tire Company in Mexico City. His stories revealed that even as a child, he realized that employers often abused and exploited workers. Don Magdaleno, who lost his father as a young boy, had to work for others to help feed the family. While employed by others, he

experienced mistreatment, and often, his employers arbitrarily determined the wages he would receive. In the mid-1930s, Don Magdaleno recounted that he went to work at the Dos Estrellas mine and began receiving a living wage; he managed to bond with workers and even joined their labor union. In 1937, he observed a tragedy when miners and their families suffered the destruction of their homes and the loss of 400 lives due to the Dos Estrellas Company's deliberate attempt to cut down on expenses by depositing the tailings resulting from the separation of gold and silver from the rock in large mounds adjacent to a large stream. In the late spring, powerful storms hit the region, which turned the powder residue into sludge, and it began flowing down, destroying houses and killing many of their residents. Shortly thereafter, the company abandoned the mine and refused to assume responsibility for the tragedy's economic losses. Hundreds of workers and their families left the area to look for work. The remaining workers attempted to establish a cooperative to run the mine, but it failed due to a lack of capital. Fortunately for Don Magdaleno, when Second World War broke out, he managed to become a railroad *bracero* and arrived in the Santa Clara Valley to work for the Western Union Railroad Company. For the next few years, he managed to enter the United States under Bracero contracts, and they ensured that he received higher wages than he had earned in Mexico.

After he married and started having children with Doña Esther, Don Magdaleno decided to stay in Mexico, near his family. Barely eking out a life in Tlalpujahua, Don Magdaleno went to Mexico City in search of opportunity in the early 1950s. He found work at the Euzkadi Tire Company and came to believe that he was

embarking on the road to economic security because he now had steady wages. Unfortunately for him, when the workers' union went on strike to negotiate better wages, the tire company refused to meet the workers' demands. Don Magdaleno, by now a fervent supporter of labor unions, backed the strike for months, but in the end, his need to feed his hungry family forced him to abandon it. He concluded that a worker in Mexico would have a difficult time providing his family with a decent way of life, and so he chose to migrate to the United States. For him, only the wages that he could earn in the United States could provide his family with the means to a better future.

Don Magdaleno shared dozens of stories about his journeys to the United States, both as a *bracero* and as an undocumented migrant. In the stories, he reveals that he was one of hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrants traveling to the United States, as it was the only way to provide a better life for their families. Don Magdaleno recounted the places that he went through and the experiences he encountered during his journeys. He observed that these places were new but also looked familiar, and the many people he met along the way were the same as those from his *patria chica*. Once in the United States, Don Magdaleno noticed that life, albeit in many ways strange, was also quite familiar to him. Although his friends were ethnic Mexicans from different parts of the United States or came from different states in Mexico, he related to them well, even if they spoke Spanish differently or had different traditions. After bringing his family to the United States across the border and spending many years there, even becoming a naturalized citizen, Don Magdaleno never stopped visiting his homeland or thought about cutting ties with Mexico

by selling his properties. He, like many of his Mexican compatriots, came to realize the full meaning of being a transnational people. They learned to adjust to living in both Mexico and the United States, and they found no problem belonging to both nations.

In the 1940s, Tejano folklorist, scholar, and visionary Americo Paredes, after years of traveling to Mexico and spending time there, postulated that Mexico and the region which now constitutes the Southwest were part of a larger nation that he called Greater Mexico. Professor Paredes designated the Mexican Republic as *Mexico de Adentro* and the Southwest and other parts of the US as *Mexico de Afuera*. Because they shared a common language and culture, he believed that the people inhabiting the two entities constituted a single nation, but were divided by a contemporary political boundary. However, the Mexican elites, the middle class, and the intelligentsia, who were mostly Europhiles, never considered the hundreds of thousands of migrants who were forced to abandon their homeland out of economic necessity as a great loss for Mexico. To them, these Mexicans were a bunch of rural *nacos* and uneducated *chusma* who had little to contribute to the making of a modern nation. Over time, many Chicanos and successive waves of migrants began to see Paredes' vision of Greater Mexico. While living in *Mexico de Afuera*, some Chicanos and the expanding ethnic Mexican population could see *Mexico de Adentro***,** and while living in *Mexico de Adentro*, they could recognize *Mexico de Afuera* for its unique quality of still retaining important ties to Mexico**.** Mexican elites and intellectuals still have little interest in Greater Mexico and continue to view the United States as *Gringolandia*.

They do not know or refuse to acknowledge that the United States is no longer mostly white American but it is on the road to becoming a multiracial society, where there will no longer be a dominant racial group, In his stories, Don Magdaleno, like his fellow Mexican compatriots who settled in the United States, discounted Greater Mexico as a mere mirage and came to regard it as a real living, tenable entity. Only transnational people, who can adapt to life in two worlds, are able to appreciate the import of Greater Mexico.

Introduction

Don Magdaleno Mora Rojas's story began long before he was born in 1919. Undoubtedly, his adventurous spirit can be traced to the arrival of his first ancestors to the American continent, who eventually wandered into Central Mexico. Don Magdaleno's early ancestors became a part of those Mesoamericans who built long-lasting civilizations in Central Mexico. With the arrival of Spanish colonists, wealthy landowners relegated Don Magdaleno's ancestors to working in the *haciendas*. Even if Don Magdaleno was born into a peasant family that the large landowners of Michoacán exploited for generations, his immediate ancestors broke free from the *hacienda* system and picked up the vocation of *arrieros*. Unlike traditional peasants, the *arrieros* traveled the roads of Central Mexico carrying freight from one point to another; often, the *arrieros* spent a lot of time away from their families. They carried knowledge and news to the new places they visited or took them back to their *patrias chicas*. The desire, perhaps a need to travel, was deeply buried in Don Magdaleno's DNA. The need to explore new places never ceased throughout his life. Even in his old age, he and his wife, Doña Esther, loved traveling back and forth from Mexico to California, and they even visited family in Chicago and Toronto, Canada.

Mesoamerican cultural traits helped Don Magdaleno adapt to new conditions, especially when he undertook long trips to Mexico or the US. From the time he was born, his family and neighbors taught him that he was a part of a community and that, as a community member, he needed to work with others to achieve a common purpose. In difficult times, the community would aid his family when it was in need; in exchange, he would do the same for the rest of the community. During his early life, Don Magdaleno observed many instances when community members helped each other, participated in community projects, or came together to carry out cultural traditions, such as religious celebrations or national holidays. The notion that he was a part of a community never escaped him. When traveling to unfamiliar places, Magdaleno always believed that as a member of a small group or the larger Mexican community, he could appeal to it whenever he needed assistance. Hence, he would always work with groups of fellow travelers, who gathered to form a circle (*hacer bola*) and discuss how to achieve a common purpose.

Thus, when Don Magdaleno first went to San José, California, as a railroad *bracero*, he immediately encountered a community of *paisanos* on whom he relied for decades. As he migrated to California for work, he always sought out fellow Mexicans because he felt he needed to belong to a community. His friends would always help him find work and housing as well as understand the new Anglo-American ways. When he brought his family to San José, his network of friends helped him and his family adjust to life in the US.

By the 1960s, he and his family had become full-time members of San José's thriving Colonia Mexicana. They lived in the physical

space occupied by the downtown *colonia* and were also part of the broader imagined *colonia*, which covered the Santa Clara Valley. Don Magdaleno interacted with the imagined *colonia* when he listened to Spanish language *locutores* who shared their music with their audiences and community news. He engaged with the imagined *colonia* when he read in *El Excentrico Magazine* about the events that La Comision Mexicana had planned for the celebration of El Cinco de Mayo or El Diesiseis de Septiembre. He became a part of the larger c*olonia* when he attended celebrations with thousands of Mexicans in the downtown Mexican neighborhood. Don Magdaleno and his family were part of *la colonia* when they and thousands of ethnic Mexican families harvested the crops throughout the Santa Clara Valley. Finally, he and his family formed part of *la colonia* when unbeknownst to them, government authorities decided to tear down part of their *colonia* to make room for freeways. For Don Magdaleno and his family, the *colonia* allowed them to adjust to life in the US and gave them a sense of belonging. Don Magdaleno, as part of the *colonia,* understood that he and his family had an obligation to friends, neighbors, and the larger Mexican community.

1
The origins of La Familia Mora Rojas

The story of Don Jose Del Carmen Natividad Magdaleno Mora Rojas, my father, began in the mountains of eastern Michoacán. His ancestors had been inhabiting the area for over a thousand years. This region was a land comprised mostly of mountains divided by deep ravines, which at one time had been heavily covered with oyamel fir, pine, cedar, and oak trees. The mountains reached altitudes above 9,000 feet above sea level. Thousands of years ago, *Chichimecas* moved into the area, surviving by hunting for food and learning agriculture. Like other Mesoamericans, they settled on cultivating corn, beans, squash, and peppers; they also most likely became highly proficient in making pottery. In time, other Indigenous people settled in the eastern mountains of Michoacán. A branch of the Otomis was one of these early groups. They had once lived on a vast stretch of land north of the Valley of Mexico and eventually settled in the Valley of Mexico. They founded great ancient cities around the valley's lake system, such as Xaltocan and Taclopan (Tacuba). It is likely that after the fall of Tenochtitlán, the urbanized Otomis retreated from the Valley of Mexico and sought refuge in the rural areas to the north and eastern Michoacán. The Mazahua people moved in greater numbers into the region and eventually occupied a large stretch

of land that covered Atlacomulco and San Felipe del Progreso, north into the area near Queretaro, and west into Michoacán. In Michoacán, the Mazahuas settled in the areas around Tlalpujahua, including San Pedro Tarimbaro, Agangangeo, and Zitacuaro. In San Pedro, Santa Maria, Tlalcotepec, San Francisco de Los Reyes, and Tlalpujahua, they established their settlements on the slopes of hills and mountains, leaving the lands closest to the ravines for planting their crops. The *Mazahuas* used narrow footpaths to enter other parts of this mountainous region; at times, they would travel through deep ravines along streams and often relied on the slopes. It would take days to cross the mountain range, which sometimes reached an altitude of 10,000 feet, until they reached the plains of Zitacuaro and Maravatio. They survived by hunting and farming on the slopes. The *Mazahuas* learned to use the fine clay along the streams to make pottery.

After the fall of Tenochtitlán, the Spaniards and their Indigenous allies set off in every direction to colonize other parts of Mexico. Usually, it would be the Catholic missionaries who would take the lead in entering new territory. Around 1550, the missionaries established themselves among the *Mazahua* community, which they renamed San Pedro Tarimbaro. By the 1570s, Spanish mining entrepreneurs had found large deposits of gold and silver on a hill. Soon, the settlers established the town of Tlalpujahua at an altitude of 9,000 feet. Over the years, they cut deep shafts and tunnels over the hill and extracted incredible amounts of silver and gold. Undoubtedly, the Spanish mine owners relied on Indigenous labor by using the *repartimiento* labor system, which required every Indigenous person to contribute free labor. Perhaps because of the drastic loss of Indigenous laborers due

to mistreatment and disease, the operators gradually turned to hiring mestizos, zambos, free blacks, and other racially hybrid people to work the mines. In El Oro and Angangueo, the Spanish entrepreneurs also discovered incredible deposits of gold and silver. For over 250 years, they extracted millions of pesos in silver and gold. Except for the construction of churches around Tlalpujahua, San Pedro, San Francisco de los Reyes, Santa Maria, Maravatio, and Angangueo, the Spaniards did little to improve the region's economic infrastructure. Spaniards also developed large, very productive haciendas by exploiting the labor and the lands of large numbers of *Mazahuas* that lived in the region.