

My Name is Carmen but this Story is Not Mine An Introduction to “Searching for Carmen: A Mexican- American Odyssey”

Carmen Pearson

My name is Carmen but this story is not mine.

It was my grandmother who was the Carmen, born to a new century as Carmen Barragán Dorcas on 22 May 1900, in San Luis Potosí, a state nestled deep in Mexico’s colonial heartland. She was the second child of four and the only daughter of María Dorcas Berro and Luis Barragán Garate.

María Dorcas Berro was a woman from the Basque country who met and married her brother’s schoolmate, a Mexican-born Luis Barragán. The story of their meeting is that Luis was furthering his studies in engineering at the Sorbonne in Paris at the time of the courtship, having consumed what information he could at the university in San Luis Potosí and in other Mexican universities. No doubt enthused and encouraged by the expansive Porfirio years of the late nineteenth century, this young engineer sought the newest theories and technological advancements to help modernize his country.¹

So María Dorcas Berro left the old country for the new, as most Europeans have, for something better. There is no written history of her family that I can find and nothing to truly verify if she ever saw her mother again or if her father and brother visited her in Mexico. I’d like to think they had, but these facts are lost. Of María Dorcas’s life, there remain only two or three faded photographs and the foggy memories of her eldest grandchildren.

“She sewed. All the time, she had a needle in her hand. She sewed and sewed...”

“She loved her grandchildren very much.”

“She preferred speaking French over Spanish.”

“She was very religious...”

¹ President Porfirio Díaz led Mexico from 1876 through 1910 and, at different times, is either credited with leading his nation into modernity or faulted for leading Mexico’s people into revolution.

“She returned to San Luis Potosí with her sons from New York after her husband’s death there. She buried him back there in New York City. I’m not sure where... No one could earn a living in San Luis Potosí in those days and so they moved to La Ciudad de Mexico and then she lived alone in an apartment, earning money from teaching languages and catechism.”

And that is all I have of her life—those few facts and my father’s memory of María Dorcas Berro’s only daughter, his mother, Carmen, running out to the hammock near the woodpile and crying and crying when the telegram was delivered, announcing her mother’s death. How painful would it have been for Carmen Messinger Barragán to sit alone and mourn on a hammock near her stone farmhouse in Upstate New York, so far from Mexico? From my father’s memory of this dark day, I assume María and her daughter, Carmen, although separated for many years and miles, were close and that she must have been a good mother.

Carmen, my grandmother, sewed and loved her grandchildren very much. She must have been like her mother. She too spoke in French and Spanish and English. Perhaps her mother had taught her this as well. Our Lady of Guadalupe always hung near Grandma’s four-posted bed and we would stare up at this dark Madonna as we lay curled in her arms and were taught to read. I do not know if I could say that Grandma, Carmen, was very religious. Her Catholicism was very private. Sometimes she would pull open her drawers and we would stand on a stool and take peaks at her neatly folded piles of embroidered handkerchiefs and scarves. A musty smell of perfume penetrated those wooden drawers. Beneath the linens, she would lift her prayer beads and we would ask her questions about them. She’d begin to explain the saints and then smile and laugh and shake her head and tell us we were “ignoramuses,” tucking her beads and other life back into their private fold.

She had married a gringo: tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed, with ancestors whose arrival to the hostile and cold shores of the northern coast of the Americas rivaled her own European ancestors’ in Mexico and eventually ended up at a small farm in Upstate New York.

As is the case with many children, we lived within the domestic. I have since learned that this is not the case with all children, but in those

days and within our family, life and history and drama were within our own walls and stories. It never occurred to us, American born, to ask Grandma how it felt to be foreign because we never thought she was. We never asked her about “acculturation” or “assimilation” or “discrimination” because we lived within our walls. We thought that the discord in that house over issues of the Virgin of Guadalupe and prayer beads and bills and money and our noise and my father’s heated accusations to his father of Carmen’s mistreatment were purely matters of domestic discord. We did not know that the dramas within those walls emanated to the world outside, nor would it have helped if we had. Alone and within those book-lined walls, we could hardly settle the dust. Had we ventured beyond the threshold, the strong winds of the outside would have made any calming or explanation impossible.

But now, those walls and the people who were my family are all long-since gone. A hug, a kiss, a smile, a candy from Grandpa’s jar can no longer settle the dust—and so I wander outside the threshold of a domesticity that once held me and soothed the unanswered questions. I do not know if Carmen ever felt that she belonged. I do not know if she ever thought enough that way to even ask the question. Although she fled to the United States from Mexico with her family during The Revolution as a teenager and never really returned with the exception of a few short visits to her homeland, she never became a U.S. citizen, not even after she birthed my father in New York. What should I make of that fact? Did she always think, as many immigrants have, that she was always a foreigner and would eventually return home?

My father, still embittered over his father, explains that he never encouraged Carmen to take out U.S. citizenship because he held to his delusions of grandeur that they would, together, return to Mexico and buy an hacienda and live happily ever after. So, was Grandpa this story’s villain, the capitalist who was looking for an edge—for a way to acquire a lifestyle in a foreign land that was no longer possible in his own? It would be easy to paint Grandpa as a villain and his villainy as the ugly American would make this a simple tale to tell, but the fact of the matter is much more complex than just that. Carmen adored her husband. She adored him even when everyone shook their heads. Carmen loved and mourned her husband and their hard lives together even after he died.

A feminist might try to explain this love by saying that Carmen Messinger Barragán, raised with all the patriarchal culture of the Catholic Church, was taught to adore the man and it was inevitable that she would play the martyred female. It is a story as old as Christianity itself and maybe that is the truth; but there are irritating facts that don't quite fit. In modern terms, we would say "Carmen had independent agency." She alone, despite all her family's misgivings, chose her husband. Although he was her brothers' close friend and even charmed her parents as he came and went, searching for mining claims and working with the family in various engineering projects both in the U.S. and Latin America after The Revolution, no one in the family wanted Carmen to marry him. Evidently, a safe marriage to a respectable Mexican man and second cousin was already arranged by the family. After the chaos and danger of The Revolution had settled, the brothers gradually returned to their country and wanted their sister to do the same. She refused. I cannot imagine the pressure Carmen felt, three brothers and how ever many cousins and her own parents, pleading with her not to marry the charismatic blue-eyed American... "Oh," Grandma would sometimes say, particularly in times when Grandpa had slumped down into one of his darker moods, "he was so tall and that blond hair... and his eyes, they were so blue..."

Was it all really that simple? Was Carmen swept off her feet by his good looks and charm? Was all that happened—that gave us life, U.S. citizenship rather than Mexican, a pure matter of infatuation?

Even our father will not begrudge his own father's good looks and charm. He remembers, almost in awe, "When he walked into a room, all eyes turned to him. He filled the room." Is that what Grandma fell in love with? A man who could fill all the empty spaces? Is that why she was able to put up with and even sympathize with his moods? She'd lost her father. She'd lost her country and a place in society that might have been her own had history been written differently. Did the blue-eyed, intellectual gringo fill some of that emptiness? Did she live vicariously through him?

Maybe in her dreaming moments she did, but not in her everyday life. The Depression made everyday living a hell with little room for dreaming. Without money, Carmen and her husband moved from the squalor of New York City and, with the assistance of a New Jersey

spinster aunt's teaching pension, they bought an isolated farm in Upstate New York. There, without plumbing, without roads in the winter, no matter how hard times were, they would have food—or so this was the theory. The reality was that Carmen's husband was ill-suited for a hard life of physical labor, made of something softer than his Carmen. It was she, the girl from a soft and warm land who, taught to embroider, taught herself to wallpaper the stone walls with newspaper to keep the drafts from her only child. It was Carmen who ran to the henhouse late at night to keep the hens and their precious eggs from freezing. It was Carmen who swung the machete in the fields to clear the brush. It was Carmen who miraculously produced money from her sewing when the tax man came by to repossess the property. It was her husband who retreated from a world so much less than he had imagined and read poetry aloud as his wife toiled.

But, during those same hard years, my father recalls that between the milking and the hauling and the worrying over bills, Grandpa filled the house with intellectuals, drifters from New York City and around the world without a place to go. The debates echoed from the kitchen table and the clinking of the brandy glasses would continue on into the wee hours of the morning. These friends came and went and some stayed on for months, with no place else to go.

"There were Russian Jews, Germans, and other intellectuals and artist-types from the city... They would sit up all night in the kitchen, arguing... Sometimes, I would get jealous because they would take my mother from me... My father and some of them once organized the first milk strike in New York State, demanding better prices for the independent farmers... They came and went and they all loved Carmen."

My father turns to my sister and I, remembering, thinking, "You girls are like her. She could be on her hands and knees all day, scrubbing, laboring—but then, she'd take a bath and dress for dinner and set the table and arrange some flowers and all that ugliness would fade in the candle-light..."

Is this what Grandpa gave his wife, in return for all he took? Moments where the drudgery and poverty faded and Carmen could let her mind wander from the constant gnawing fears of dispossession? I recall their trips to Canada in their later years. When her age caused us

to worry over Grandma's drive to the local market—let alone locales beyond that—she would wave good-bye to us, propped up on a pillow and commandeered by Grandpa beside her in the old Buick, searching for the land of tomorrow. Grandpa's dreams had shifted in those last years and he believed the future lay north of the 49th parallel. Was it Grandpa's tenacity and insistent belief that somewhere he would find the Lost City of Gold or The Happy Valley the quality that Carmen loved so much about him—despite how far-fetched and crazy it all seemed at the time? Or, was her compliance, car wrecks on the Trans-Canada Highway, and discomforts in those last years just another way to placate a difficult old man? Our grandmother never explained, nor expressed a bitterness for life's turns, at least not aloud. When we were older and would ask, she would somehow say that the ups and downs were part of the history of the world and that was the only way to understand one's own story...

And here I am. It is 2006 and I sit in a little room in the barn, staring down at my grandmother's daily journals, wondering what I can create from the broken pieces. The words. And I wonder, why should anyone care to even read this story and what is it I am really looking for? A place in history where I can touch a moment with my fingertip and claim an understanding—a right? And for what? It is all in the past.

I sit and look out over the dirty late winter snow and feel the chill that blows in through the thin walls off the Canadian Rockies just to the west and I wonder. Once again, am I repeating a family history, far from the land where I was born, married, just as the women before me, to a foreigner? In each generation, the climate seems to be growing colder and the landscape more remote. María lived in Mexico. Carmen lived in New York. This Carmen lives in the foothills of Alberta in a land where winter can stretch from August to June. I rub my feet along the electric heater and think about belonging, about nationality, about a logical explanation for our movements and lives. Has it been the destiny of the women in our family to discover ourselves in distant lands or are we just chaff in the great winds of chance and capitalism—blown across the landscape with each boom and bust?

Did Carmen wonder where she belonged? Did María Dorcas? Need I? We are not immigrants in the traditional sense of the word. When Americans think of immigrants, we think of European families, piled up

at Ellis Island; of pioneers traveling across the prairies, clutching their children to their sides on their bumpy Conestoga wagons; of war refugees; Cubans exiles; starving Haitians on flimsy boats; of Mexican workers dodging Border Patrol near the Río Grande during the dark hours of the night. We are none of those. As far as I can tell, we are all women, who, again, with independent agency, made personal choices resulting in our immigration. We are not the people who have written history; instead, we have always remained in that silent fringe of the middle class, living our lives largely within the domestic, somewhat isolated from extended family, from politics and from a culture we were born into.

Do our stories even matter? Probably not as much as others'. Relative to others', our hardships are miniscule. We are a minority who, in the big scheme of things, are a statistical insignificance. We all married outside our nationalities. Are we the modern versions of *La Malinche*?² Can we be accused of selling out our own? Of crossing the line for personal gain? Of muddying the pure races? Or, are we the mothers of new nations not yet fully formed?

With all the moves in our lives, someone always carefully packed the daily journals that Carmen maintained throughout her adult life. "Someday," my mother repeated, "someone needs to do something with Grandma's journals..."

The last time my mother repeated that—gesturing to the old attic in her Colorado ranch house, I did not know at the time that I would never hear her voice again. She wasn't ill, spilling out her last words to me that day. She was healthy and vibrant and merely allowing her mind and conversation to idle after a big holiday meal. No one knew she would die the next day and I'm sure she didn't know the impact that those words would have on me. They were my mother's last and like the Carmen before me, I went off like a wounded animal, and cried and cried when my mother died. She was a good mother too.

² *La Malinche* (also known as Doña Marina and Malintzin) is viewed not only as the mother of mestizos—but also as the symbol of national betrayal (and sometimes, a whore). See Sandra Messinger Cypress's *La Malinche in Mexican Literature*.

And so now I sit, alone, with a little cardboard tomato box. Inside, each worn leather journal holds a year, beginning in 1945, ending in 1977. My father says there may be more. Grandma would have been forty-four when she began her journal in January of 1945. I too am forty-four. I muse: is there a significance in this coincidence? And then I wonder, why did Grandma keep these journals? There was the practical matter of keeping track of business and meetings—but was there something more?³

Daily journals are very different from memoirs or autobiographies. There is a lack of reflection, an immediacy, what a narratologist might refer to as the “episodic” rather than “diachronic self.”⁴ In actual fact, there is very little to work with unless the fictional imagination is employed to recreate a life and time.

I read some of the entries for January 1945. There is a column of numbers. Is this money? Survey calculations?

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8.2 – 2.9 – 1.0 – 1.0

Tuesday January 2

Literary Guild 123-1049

And so it goes. January 5 calculates the hours of what seems to be a hired hand. She writes: “Elmer started Monday.” This is followed by a

³ In her book review of *Inscribing the Daily*, Elaine Neil Orr writes that studying women’s diaries “illustrates the need to develop reading strategies that are appropriate to women’s life writing practices.... the content and form of women’s diaries continue to be of interest to women’s studies scholars because these texts disclose how women construct knowledge, how they negotiate power in their particular cultural contexts, how they relate interpersonally, and in some case, how they come to healing through writing” (892). See also, Barbara Rylko-Bauer’s “Bring the Past into the Present;” where the author examines “History-write-large” in “intimate family histories” (4) and Valerie Raoul’s “Women’s Diaries as Life-Savings” where the author argues that women’s diaries can be empowering.

⁴ See Battersby’s article “Narrativity, Self and Self-Representation,” which responds to Strawson’s “Against Narrativity.” See also Eakin’s “What Are We Reading...?”, Lisa Zunshine’s “Theory of Mind,” and George Butte’s “I Know That I Know...” —all of discuss the creation of “self” relative to the narrative process.

listing of jobsites. Elmer's hours are carefully added. He'd earned \$100 for what looks like a month of labor. During those years, Grandpa must have given up on finding his fortune in the mines of Santa Domingo and settled down to the grueling business of land surveying through the heavy brush in Upstate New York, with Carmen by his side.

There is nothing so far to even indicate a life, a woman, a Mexican exile. However, on Tuesday, January 9, the entries change and the skeleton of a life begins to appear. Carmen writes:

Xmas list:

George Clifford
1168 N Edgmont St
Hollywood Calif

Argonzonis
Lourdres 54-Mexico D.F.

So far, I do not recognize these names, but on the page for January 10, the list continues. Now, it is her three brothers, scattered in those years:

Adrian
Frontera. 19 Bis - 0

During those war years, Mexico prospered and so did Carmen's brothers. Hence, her hard life in war-rationed New York became even more of a contrast and conundrum to her family south of the Border.

The lists go on for pages, more names from Mexico:

Miguel Dorcas Beno
Dueno 33 - Mex.

I eagerly wonder, could this be María Barragán Dorcas' brother? I read on...

Joe Freeman
301 E 38th N.Y.C.

This man's name, I recognize. His book, *An American Testament*, published in 1938 by the Left Book Club sits on my shelf, identifying its author as editor of *The New Masses*. According to my father, Joe Freeman and his wife were his parents' very close friends during those years. I lift the book from the shelf and it falls open to a worn page. The author discusses the events leading up to his early years in New York: "[t]he outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 aroused no enthusiasm

among Jews..." (24). Freeman goes on to explain how "[c]oming to America at seven was like being born again" (26). However, this rebirth was not without its trials. As Freeman recounts his assimilation into American culture, he reflects that the greatest hardship was not learning the language, nor avoiding the street gangs, nor the poverty. It was the fear of loneliness. He concludes by writing: "The dream [and antidote for this fear] came: to have friends who you love and who love you" (30).

It is hard to imagine, reading the strong words about alienation and loneliness in this worn text and knowing that Carmen would have read each word many times that she did not wonder about nationality and belonging and the history of her own people as well. It is also easy to understand why she would have felt an affinity to these immigrants.

There are no more entries until Saturday April 7:

Aunt Viola was sick, all day. I fixed things and cleaned a chicken in the afternoon. We went to survey at Kripplebush for Caulfield, we took Farrandito along. He wanted to see us survey.

"Farrandito," my father, would have been eight at the time. Aunt Viola was the aunt of Carmen's husband, Etienne Farrand, Sr. and I have been told that she adored and spoiled him and, in fact, raised him when he fell out with his own parents and left home at an early age. Aunt Viola is the retired teacher and spinster, the one who provided the down payment for Whitfield Farm and the one whose pension helped carry the family through the hard years and who also helped to raise my father, "Farrandito," while Carmen worked in the field.

Sunday – April 15

I sewed all day and made a blouse of blue and white stripes for the slacks. It turned out very pretty.

She lived too far to attend Church regularly. On Sundays, at least, she did not go to the field and work. Instead, Carmen sewed. Did the threads she drew on those long Sundays somehow pull her back to a world that was more her own? The entries continue, describing the rain, Auntie's bad health, that she has sewed pajamas for "the boy" – her son. The pages continue with entries about the rain, about neighbors coming to pick up loads of hay, about surveys and of her husband's being elected as the trustee of the Whitfield School, of more rain, of 4-H

meetings... And then, on Thursday May 3, at the bottom of the entry, after sentences about the rain, the surveys, the man who delivered the cow and "got in the ditch," the first sentence in Spanish appears: "*Me enferme hoy en la noche.*" Why, I wonder does she write this [about feeling ill in the night] in Spanish? And for that matter, why, since this is a personal journal, isn't everything written in Spanish? On the next page, Saturday – May 5, she writes:

Father McDonald came. He wants Farrandito to come to church.
He might make his first communion.
On Sunday, May 6, she continues: "We went to Church in
Rosendale. I hope Farrandito can make his first Communion..."

The tension she must have felt over her only son's communion and her husband's lack of faith are all but hidden in these entries with the exception of the word "hope."

As I eagerly leaf through the pages of Carmen's journals, places and faces and stories appear to me, but I stop and close 1945. This is meant to be an academic project, not a self-indulgence. The questions that have been haunting me for months flood back.

Even if I do proceed with this project, how do I explain the first unchronicled forty-five years of Carmen's life, her childhood before The Revolution? The terrifying train ride out? The years in Laredo, San Antonio, Florida, New York? Her marriage? The early years when one painful miscarriage flowed into the next? And, what do I do to imagine the days when her journal entries simply read, "Surveyed" or "It rained." And, how do I explain what I'm truly searching for in this narrative?

In "Memory and the Archive in Contemporary Life-Writing," Michael Sheringham offers encouraging words, suggesting that the story lives in the tension of what has been inscribed and what is lost to time.⁵

⁵ Sheringham writes: "It may be naïve to see the document as material proof of the past state of affairs, independent of the constructions we put on it; but to forego this anxiety does not dispose of the documents' claim to some sort of authority [...] [and in this, there is a conjoining of presence and absence which invites us to reconstruct] [...] [knowing that] we can never reconstitute the temporal chain that separates us from the moment of its inscription" (51).

Other narratologists, such as Galen Strawson, suggest that perhaps I am creating “a self” as I construct this narrative, that what I’m truly searching for is a sense of identity found within the process of assembling the story itself.⁶ However, when I read this, I immediately think: I’m not that interested in me. But, I wonder: what is it then?

Last year, I traveled to Mexico to visit relatives I have not seen in thirty years. The premise was to hear and collect their stories and recollections of Carmen. I found myself walking with distant cousins through the streets of San Miguel de Allende and San Luis Potosí.

“Could we find the house that was once theirs?”

“Was this the Church they attended?”

“Did they offer confession over there?”

And then, we emerge from the *Tunel Ogarrío*, a 2300 meter tunnel constructed between 1897 and 1901 that separates *Real de Catorce* from the rest of the world. Rubbing hips with the donkeys whose ancestors, along with traders and miners, speculators and laborers once filled this valley; we walk, hand-in-hand: “Grandfather Luis worked in the mines here. We have been told he was the mayor here.”

We wander past the pelota wall, *La Plaza de Toros*, the crumbling aqueducts and stop to stare up at the slag piles from mines named *La Purísima*, *Milagro*, *Concepción*, *Dolores*, and *Santa Ana*. We stop on *El Puente de Purísima*. She says, “Grandfather probably helped to build this bridge.”

We wander on and enter the cool luminescence of the Church of Guadalupe and watch the Pilgrims as they, in turn, offer their prayers to St. Francis of Assisi, just as they have for centuries. Eventually, we discover what must have been the city hall. The mayors’ pictures adorn the walls. We search eagerly for a familiar name, but the portraits stop in the thirties.

There are a few American tourists around. They look at me, somehow knowing, despite the company I keep and my silence that I am not from this land. Stubbornly I turn from them. My cousins tighten their grip with mine and I wonder: do I actually feel as though the land and the streets are any more mine than they are a tourist’s simply because my family once lived and worked here? What difference does the past

⁶ See Galen Strawson’s “Against Narrativity.”

matter now? Do I really think that the land will speak to me in a way it wouldn't to tourists, to *los extranjeros*? I look over at Regina. She kneels beneath the Virgin of Guadalupe and weeps. I do not quite know why, but I stand in silence and in awe—over something that was lost. Alone, she and I walk amongst specters. We look into dark alleys, simultaneously imagining our ancestors walking along these same cobbled streets.

It was almost a year ago when I sat across the table, shocked at the Chicano publisher's vehement outpouring concerning my proposal over this project—and shocked at my own *naïveté*.

"It is the story of the enemy, why would anyone care?" he burst out.

I swallowed, knowing that he was no longer interested in any form of publication of my grandmother's diaries or of a narrative built up around them. Really, I'd known that since before he'd said a word. He'd looked at me as he arrived, in disbelief and, I think, in disgust. I'd stood up from the table and tried to shake his hand. He held his arms to his side and stared up at me. I towered almost two feet above his dark head and in that moment, I believe I could hear his thoughts:

"You are NOT a Carmen..." Or, at the very least, "you are NOT the Carmen I expected..."

This was nothing new. My name was given to me because it was the name of my Grandmother. But that Carmen was small and black curls surrounded her expressive dark eyes and face. Me? I am tall and was very blond when I was young and although my eyes are brown, they seem washed out, like earth plowed too many times, compared to those of my relatives. Even my brother and sister pestered me when I was young that I must have been adopted because I was so different from them. Their hair was black and thick and their complexions were a rich olive. Although I sometimes wondered myself that my parents hadn't made a poor choice in names, I always knew I was a Carmen.

We had lived in a time and in a place where a child's name received deep consideration. It was not a matter of which flower or movie star or constellation a parent might like. Instead, it was a matter of which relative would be honored. Wrong choices caused family feuds that lasted for years, sometimes for generations. Living in such a time and place, people would turn to me and smile, trying to explain to themselves and to me the strange and seemingly inappropriate choice of name, "Oh,

your parents must be big fans of the opera..." And before I could explain that we'd never seen an opera in our lives, they would continue, "dark and lusty and independent..." They'd smile at me and I'd blush. "Well, not actually, it was my *abuelita*, I'd explain..."—trying to sound convincing with one of the only Spanish words I could pronounce with confidence. That done, the speakers would inevitably dismiss me as a genetic throwback and move on, sometimes adding, "Well, it is a pretty name."⁷

On this particular April day and to this particular man, I seemed an impostor, not worthy of the name. I wanted to tell him that I understood and felt both the honor and burden in having been named "Carmen" and it was for this specific reason that I had come to him. But he didn't give me a chance. The pounding interview continued.

When I finally accepted that I had very little in common with this man and what he represented and his cause and that, in complete ignorance, I had stepped into a minefield and had threatened his hard won position of power and that he would never publish a word I wrote, I decided that I should at least view the tremulous hour as a learning experience.

There has been long debate over the word "Chicano" versus "Mexican American" versus "Mexican-American" versus "Mexican." Certainly, I only ever heard my grandmother refer to herself as the latter and I never heard my father call himself anything but an "American," certainly not a "Mexican-American" or "Mexican American." The *Chicana/a* is a distinctive and hard-earned identity that includes those who live in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and those who labor as an invisible population in the U.S. and those, similar to other ethnic minorities, who were forbidden entry to public places, to schools, to neighborhoods. Vicki Ruiz offers one of the most succinct discussions of these different terms in her introduction to *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America*. She writes:

⁷ The name "Carmen"—her Saint's day is July 16—is derived from the *Virgen del Carmen*, the Virgin Mary of Mount Carmelo; from the Old Testament, her story involves the prophet Elias' retreat to a cave in Mount Carmelo near Haifa (Israel). She is the patron saint adopted by mariners and fishermen.

Women of Mexican birth or descent refer to themselves by many names—Mexicana, Mexican American, and Chicana (to name just three). Self-identification speaks volumes about regional, generational, and even political orientations. The term Mexicana typically refers to immigrant women, with Mexican American signifying U.S. birth. Chicana reflects a political consciousness borne of the Chicano Student Movement, often a generational marker for those of us coming of age during the 1960s and 1970s. Chicana/o has also been embraced by some of our elders and our children who share in the political ideals of the movement. (xiv)

Although it was the work of the *Chicano/as* scholars that brought me to realize that someone might be even remotely interested in Carmen's old diaries, I now appreciate that hers is not *their* story. However, even as the interview with the Chicano publisher pounded on, I was not willing to concede, as this publisher wished I might, that hers was not a story worth telling. Finally, I had just about enough and something rose up and poured through my polite schoolgirl veneer:

"So," I asked, "is history only to be written by victors?"

The publisher stopped and looked over at me, "Well, no..." he conceded.

"Well, what then?" I asked. I understood that he felt it his responsibility to publish and publicize the hardships and the atrocities his people had suffered and continue to suffer, but I could not understand his anger about my family.

He began again. "They fled during The Revolution because they were of Porfirio. They were the oppressors..."

I vaguely remembered that both my father and grandmother had said how the whole family loathed government just as a matter of principal and would have been happy to have been left alone to build their dams and roads in peace.

"But, your family benefited from those years," the Chicano publisher pointed out.

And again, the blood was on my hands. In the state-run education of New York in the seventies, I had been taught, along with the Gettysburg Address and the names of the battlefields of the American Revolution, that it was our people who were responsible for destroying the Native culture, for oppressing the Blacks and for damaging the environment. Today, this fact was just one more sin to be added to the list and the

burden I was meant to carry. I could only seek consolation in the fact that we were really never important enough to be true oppressors and villains because, as far as I knew, we were usually too occupied with the business of surviving. But, even with this fact in mind, I knew we could still be accused by some of buying into an oppressive economic force and were therefore complicit with all these injustices.

I sat at the table, staring at my fork and then started. "We didn't benefit too much." I looked over at the Chicano publisher. "We lost everything but what we carried inside us."

Even here, he found fault. The fact that our family could find jobs state-side because of the education their privilege had allowed them was a dark mark against them. Sure I couldn't win this debate, I tried one last turn: "The only thing I know is that we were always brought up to be proud of our Mexican heritage. We never knew shame from that." Silenced for a moment, he considered what I said, and concluded: "that is because your family moved so far from the conflict. They buried themselves in some obscure farm and tried to recreate the *hacienda* some place else..."

It seemed odd to think of Whitfield Farm as an *hacienda*, but there was no winning and so I made one last comment and stopped. "Whatever they did wrong or right, they raised us to be both interested and proud in our heritage. If cultural discrimination and hegemony is the enemy, then maybe they avoided some of that."

The sting of that interview still chills and inhibits me and so it was with interest that I read the words of Genaro M. Padilla in *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography*. In his text's preface he explains his political difficulties as a Chicano in proceeding with his studies which included the writings of those he considers "*ricos*" or landowners.⁸ As much as he too would like to exclude these

⁸ Padilla writes: "This book represents my understanding of the ways in which Mexican American autobiography came into formation as a personal and communitarian response to the threat of erasure. Understanding did not come easily.... I more than once decided to abandon the project for political reasons. I would not spend my intellectual life arguing on behalf of people I probably wouldn't have liked in person. But the more I read their narratives, and the more social and political history, newspapers and letters I read, the more I came

individuals' stories from his own, he admits that he cannot. He writes: "Theirs are [also] autobiographical narratives of dispossession [and, I would like to add, "In some cases, theirs are also the narratives of maintenance and repossession...]" (x).

With Padilla's words, I feel somewhat buoyed that a narrative built around the words in Carmen's diaries might be worthwhile. In some ways, Padilla admits that such stories are not the ones he wishes he had—but, since they are all there is, he will accept them and proceed. But, I wonder... Is there a value in these words, beyond the scarcity of others? Could it be argued that the words and memories of the middle class struggle contribute a necessary and integral link to an explanation of cultural shifts, of human struggles, movement, and the very formation and evolution of nation states?

Once more, looking for comfort, for guidance, I turn back to the tomato box on the floor, to some thirty years of records—jotted down in a few brief words and stored for years in the loft of a barn. These are our family archives. Again, I ask myself: how do I recreate a meaningful history out of so little and if I do, isn't it presumptuous and even neo-colonial to imagine that in exploring and recreating those streets and hills that they might come to be any more mine than they were before—or, that there is really a place on this earth I can cast any claim to at all? I cling to Carmen's diaries as though the answer is somehow hidden in their pages and I persist and wonder if I will search again for specters in the back streets of the villages around Pamplona and if I will walk the beaches on the Bay of Biscay, trying to find some traces of María Dorcas Berro and of a footprint that might bear any resemblance to my own.

Most likely I am not the Carmen you expected and the Carmen I try to describe is probably not the Carmen you hoped to find here, but, maybe like Padilla, you will come to appreciate that our stories are not so very far from those of your own *antepasados*. Maybe if, today, you read this, tomorrow you will find your own Carmen.

to realize that by the end of the nineteenth century just about the only estate left to any of our *antepasados* was one situated in the geography of the past" (x).

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Carmen Pearson has taught English at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta and at the University of Houston in Texas. She is currently working on a book-length version of *Searching for Carmen: A Mexican-American Odyssey*, of which this essay is part.