

Madison Browning
Trans-Border Institute
Interview

Interviewer: Madison Browning
Interviewee: Maria Pilar Aquino

MB: You grew up in a border town correct, can you tell me a little bit about being raised there?

MA: Yeah, I was born in the state of Nayarit Mexico and I am member of a large family, we are eight children. I am number two in my family. So in those years, late 1950s and early 1960s my father was a part of the migrant workers program, the Bracero program.

MB: Ohh ok.

MA: In the early 1960s, 1964 the Bracero program came to an end on the part of the U.S. so before that my father decided to relocate his family. So we moved from the state of Nayarit to the small city of San Luis Rio Colorado, Sonora in the northern of the state by the border. The border town on the US side is San Luis Arizona. San Luis Arizona plays an important role because in San Luis Arizona Cesar Chavez began his work. My father became a part of that movement and in fact César Chavez died in San Luis Arizona as well so the Campesina movement is very important in that area. I myself, when I was young also worked in the fields during the summer. My sisters and I would spend our time harvesting agricultural products and we also did the route of the migrants to Reno Nevada, Sacramento, Fresno Bakersfield, so I know how workers gather onions, tomatoes lettuce and so forth. So with those experiences growing up at the border, as I think back to that period in my life in my younger years for me I developed a sense that things were not right because initially I was living on the Mexican side so for me awareness of poverty and discrepancy in social living conditions became very strong, I could not name things analytically yet but all I knew was affecting how we were living. Not only me and my family, but my friends and in general people living under very harsh conditions. So to me it was a sense that I had as I saw my friends, and we were poor, I would see my friends who were living in worse conditions than I and I knew that things were not right so early in my life I felt like a call to do something. So I developed sensitivity to those who were experiencing the hardships of life.

MB: Alright so how have you the border region develop or change over the years in terms of In terms of security, living conditions, and access to both sides?

MA: There is an enormous change in my experience because of course I continue to visit my family, cause my family continues to live in that area so 50% lives on the Mexican side and 50% lives on the US side and that's a way we grew up. We became border crossers. So the circumstances of life made us border crossers and I believe that border crossers can be taken physically but also metaphorically, symbolically. So that area allowed us to develop the skills of thinking of ourselves as border crossers so it became part of our being, part of ourselves, part of our identity, and part of who we are. So in terms of how have I experienced things of how things

were and how they are now. I must say that for me, that kind of moral sense that things were not right became clearer as I developed the analytical consciousness but that came later as I began to ask why things were the way they were. So the why looking for explanations so for me it became very clear physically and also symbolically that I was growing up in a area when scholars speak about quote unquote first world and the unevenness of the third world I knew it experientially that it was true. I did not need scientific data; I did not need ethnographic studies to say how do we establish the disparity or the inequalities between the first world and the third world. I knew it by experience. With one foot on the Mexican side and one foot on the US side so to me it was very clear as soon as you cross the border, you know about things naturally simply because of the conditions of roads, homes people, so it just becomes part of ones own consciousness. So my analytical skills became later as I looked for theories and scientific approaches to the nature of the border so for me the notion of borderlands became a physical space with in which I could touch and sense the harsh realities experienced by people as I mentioned before, but it also became symbolic space.

MB: How has your personal experience of obtaining US citizenship or a work visa shaped your view of US immigration policy?

MA: For me acquiring the US citizenship I could only do that because I could retain my Mexican citizenship. so I believe that bi-national citizenship gives people more freedom. So I can retain quote unquote my new nationality. So I acquired my US citizen ship in 1996 it gave me physiological relief in terms of no longer being with the fear. I was no longer with the fear that things would happen to me and I also become more empowered to have more voice in the political process of the US and I could also have the freedom of buying a home, becoming a homeowner and that gave me a sense of rootedness and belonging to the community. It is in many ways like having the right to speak out. Having the right speak about political issues that affect not only me and my family but also the larger community beyond my own culture. So I took ownership of the situations that were affecting all other communities. Everyone beyond the mere Latino community because we were all involved as citizens as part of this country. The present and future of our living situation affects us all. So it expanded my view of several responsibilities.

MB: In your opinion what do you see as a major problem plaguing the US-Mexican border region?

MA: There are several. I want to highlight one problem related to education. On the educational arena I believe that major problem is how can we people related to educational institutions and educational process contribute to better sharpen the skills for recognizes and integrating complex dynamics of cultural interaction at the border. I believe that we contribute to shaping the new generations or the new educational process the capacity to engaging in dialogue and appreciation of the shared space that we have. Taking ownership of our shared space so whatever we think about the present and future of our societies we are co-owners of that so we share common responsibilities, so I think that we can sharpen the skills or increase the capacities of the younger generations to appreciate that space. SO I believe that will create a platform for addressing other major problems such as economics and politics and so forth. If one thinks about the major problem of the US-Mexican borer as employment or immigration, or issues of security we can do

that and that is perhaps the most common issue raised by scholars of the borders. I am not an expert in the border, I am just a catholic theologian feminist theologian but the experts will say bilateral relationships in terms of employment policy for immigration, immigration reform and so forth. From my standpoint as an educator and a theologian, the window that would allow us to engage in better solutions is we develop the skills to wear someone else's shoes. Develop a capacity so I think that in terms of education, culture and religion would come into play in that framework will give us better skills to address or to find commonality to responses to economic problems.

MB: So you would say that you are a proponent of engaging in cross-cultural exchange programs, perhaps so that Americans can go down there and put themselves in the shoes of say a Mexican teenager and visa versa?

MA: But I will say also that the opposite will also work in this type of approach in means that common people, grassroots people are also professors, intellectuals, journalists, people who affect public opinion from the Mexican side can interact as well with European American communities in the USA. We need to bring down the walls, bring down the mental walls that keep dialogue apart. I think that we need to develop the skills of trust and that feeling that beyond ethnical beyond cultural background. This is the only space that we have and we re sharing together so we have common responsibilities. So it is beyond ethnicity and beyond social class and so on and so forth. Along those lines, I believe that the sense of interdependence, developing the sense of interdependence decisions made on the US side do significantly affect what happens on the Mexican side. And decisions on the Mexican side deeply affect what happens on the US side. For example when speaking about immigration, or migration processes which on the US and Mexico, scholars usually tend to forget or to aviate or they need to stress that on the Mexican side there is also a significant problem of corruption. And also the political elites on the Mexican side benefit from immigration to the U.S. They benefit simply because of the remittances.

MB: Oh yes.

MA: Very few people recognize that problem on the Mexican side. The economic system of Mexico is benefiting and the political elite, once they support the idea of exporting labor force. They don't care if its legal or illegal, they don't care. I don't believe they do, otherwise, the Mexican consult in the U.S. would work more efficiently. If they would care more about the legal or illegal status of the Mexican population or the human rights in the U.S. they will have a better and more efficient consult system or embassies system and they do not. So I do not know what the approximants of remittances for this year are. But the last time I saw the numbers was Mexico was receiving and I need to find the exact year from the World Bank keeps the studies up to date. So Mexico receives no less than a billion dollars per year. And this is on the remittances system and this is poor people. A large percentage of undocumented workers in the U.S. are sending remittances in species or in money to the Mexican side. So it is the poor people in the U.S. keeping alive the poor people in Mexico. While Mexico has the system of undocumented workers in the U.S. sending money to the poor on the Mexican side, the political elite is free of responsibility. That is my thesis. If we avoid the issues of remittances them we are not being efficient. And Mexican political elites must be held responsible for the problem. It is

not just the U.S. it is not just the U.S. system being unfair and unjust. No I do not think so. So I believe the Mexican side must also be accountable for the problem.

MB: What are some of your suggestions towards cooperation for the U.S. and Mexican government to maybe work together towards a common solution for the remittance issue in particular?

MA: In particular that involves systemic transformation on the Mexican system. I have no hope that willingness of the political elite would do such transformations and there is also another problem and that involves the military. I believe that what we call the Federalas in Mexico, the military, in Mexico benefit from the drug industry. So people speak about drug being a major problem on the Mexican and U.S. side the other part that scholars have difficulty bringing to the light is the fact that the military on the Mexican side is benefiting because they will receive contributions from the drug cartels to keep the routes of drugs reaching the U.S. border so there are many systemic issues that if not addressed correctly no matter what we do, our work will be just social systems and relationships will become much more difficult.

MB: From your experience what has been the role of women in the border region in terms of shaping policy, negotiating peace, or along the lines of cooperation?

MA: In fact I believe that all women rest disproportionality, the social inequalities that we leave at the border in spite of that it is women who give up show compassion to the families who lack basic human needs. I am thinking about food, I am thinking about basic human security, having a roof in the migration routes. Women offer their homes; women offer their help while people cross the border or while they wait crossing the border. They support their sons their husbands and I believe that they are the ones who keep hope and spirituality alive, spirituality of resistance, spirituality of compassion, spirituality of solidarity. Of course though you will also find women involved in the networks of the drug trafficking, women are also involved in sex trafficking in the border. Women are involved in benefiting from prostitution, pimps and so forth. So women are also involved in the coyotes. A coyotes is the person who does the logistics, the middleman. And the coyotes they also get robbed so they get the money from the undocumented workers then on the Mexican side they cross over the border then they leave them there. They abandon the groups after the border. So women are there but the large majority of women I believe are interested in better conditions of peace.

MB: Alright so one last question, you sort of addressed it a little but earlier, but I was wondering if you could elaborate on how your border experience influenced your academic focuses of liberation theologies, feminist theologies and conflict transformation?

MP: I believe that my experience of being so close to poverty and being so close to people who lacked the basics of life fostered in me the sense of valuing education so I always dreamed about becoming a teacher. I was a catechist since my early years, when I started my dreaming of teaching. So the environment of the Catholic church of being very close to communities of religious nuns provided me with examples of women who valued education, empowering people, people who came together to change the conditions of life. So I believe that it was that type of visions of the awareness that things can be different and that, things are possible to be changed

and I confirmed that over and over. So today for me my dream was to become a college professor. When I was growing up and I saw colleges my heart would just go out to the campus and would want to become a professor. So that is what I did, just worked and continued my studies and so that is why I am here. So that s why I value so much the position that I have and I think it is a blessing. And my educational efforts are ethically guided. Academic knowledge much serve the purpose of bettering the life of all of us who share a common space and I think that there is always an ethical orientation to theological knowledge and the contribution to building just social systems.

MB: Thank you very much for you very interesting and informative insight.