

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Growing Up *Indio* during the Mexican Miracle: Childhood, Race and the Politics of Memory

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Abstract

This article explores the childhood of a Mexican Indigenous activist, Raúl Javier Gatica Bautista, who was born in 1963 in the Oaxacan market town of Tlaxiaco. Growing up in poor circumstances, Gatica would become a leader in the social movements that between the 1980s and early 2000s pushed Mexico toward gradual democratic reform. The article seeks to describe what it was like to grow up poor and Indigenous at a time (later dubbed the Mexican Miracle) of impressive social and economic advances. Paying special attention to the experience of racial abuse, the article also asks how Gatica's childhood came to inform his political militancy. While other historians have linked the phenomenon of political radicalism in twentieth-century Latin America to particular social conditions, or to the influence and adaptation of global ideologies, this article seeks the origins of Gatica's radicalism in the experience of a racialised childhood.

Keywords: social movements; childhood; politics; oral history; Indigenous

Prologue

Palemón Gregorio Gatica first met his future wife, Merced Bautista Santiago, because his father sold wood and her father bought it. Merced's parents owned a brickmaking oven in San Miguelito, a collection of farms, huts and houses above Tlaxiaco – in Oaxaca's Mixteca mountains – that was then at the very beginning of its transition from hamlet to suburb.¹ Palemón lived on the far side of another collection of farms and houses: La Purísima, a mountain hamlet a short distance from Tlaxiaco. And Palemón's parents had come from farther still. Their birth town, Santiago Yosundúa, was 200 km distant, accessible only by mule-path, and agriculturally self-sufficient.² By marrying the brickmaker's daughter, by joining in the brickmaking

¹In political terms, San Miguelito was an *agencia* of the municipality of Tlaxiaco. *Agencias* were subordinated to municipalities but had certain administrative functions. On the political and administrative organisation of the Mixteca, see Robert Ravicz, *Organización social de los Mixtecos* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1965), p. 93, and Alejandro Marroquín (ed.), *La ciudad mercado: Tlaxiaco* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1957), pp. 58–60.

²Interviews with José Gatica, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 30 Oct. 2019, and Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 17 Feb. 2020; phone interview with Refugio ('Virginia') Gregorio, Raúl's sister, 26 March 2020. All those

business and setting up home in San Miguelito, Palemón carried on his parents' trajectory of edging closer to urban life and its opportunities for profit.

To speak of Tlaxiaco's 'urban' life may however be an exaggeration. In 1950, the year Palemón and Merced got married, the municipality of Tlaxiaco had a population of 13,277, a figure that included the inhabitants of outlying *agencias* like San Miguelito.³ The town proper was compact and small. The opportunities it presented to rural migrants were not quite dazzling. They were certainly less plentiful than those available in Oaxaca City (the state capital and home to 47,000 people), and they paled before those beckoning in industrial centres like Puebla (298,000 inhabitants), one state over, let alone in the sprawling labyrinth of Mexico City (3,365,000 inhabitants).⁴ It was those bigger cities that most fully embodied the promise of Mexico's developmentalist state during the frantic three and a half decades, from 1940 to the mid-1970s, known as the 'Mexican Miracle' – a time when the state invested hugely in public services and the national economy more than doubled in size. But size is relative, and Tlaxiaco was one of two major mercantile hubs in an extensive mountain region, the Mixteca, whose population numbered more than 400,000.⁵ To peasants who trekked to Tlaxiaco's weekly market, or who sought help in its government offices, the town was important. Unlike larger and further-off cities, it was also familiar. Its climate, damp and cold, was typical for a region that in the Mixtec language was called 'Ñuu Savi', the land of rain.⁶

To the young Palemón, Tlaxiaco's occupational opportunities were at any rate urgently needed. For while it was true that Palemón's mother owned land that was extensive by peasant standards, the family's way of life could be sustainably passed down to only a select number of children – and Palemón was the youngest of thirteen siblings. Palemón, furthermore, for reasons no one now remembers, was left out of his mother's inheritance.⁷ He would have to make his own way in the world. It was the position of his bride that held out some hope. Merced's parents, too, owned land, as well as the brickmaking workshop, and they had only four children. When Palemón married Merced, he was marrying up.

The inequality between bride and groom should not be exaggerated. Both came from peasant stock. Both had Indigenous, Mixtec-speaking fathers. Both had left

interviewed for this article have given their permission to the author for their words and names to be cited. Passages from the interviews have been translated by the author and edited for clarity and coherence.

³Marroquín (ed.), *La ciudad mercado*, p. 65.

⁴The 1950 population figures are taken from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Dynamics, 'File 12: Population of Urban Agglomerations with 300,000 Inhabitants or More in 2018, by Country, 1950–2035 (thousands)', in *World Urbanization Prospects: 2018*, available at <https://population.un.org/wup/Download/> (last accessed 20 Dec. 2021).

⁵Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, 'El problema humano de las Mixtecas', in Marroquín (ed.), *La ciudad mercado*, p. 18.

⁶On the history of the Mixteca, see Rodolfo Pastor, *Campesinos y reformas: La mixteca, 1700–1856* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Históricos, Colegio de México, 1987); María de los Ángeles Romero Frizzi, *Economía y vida de los españoles en la Mixteca Alta, 1519–1720* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 1990); Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñudzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Ronald Spores and Andrew K. Balkansky, *The Mixtecs of Oaxaca: Ancient Times to the Present* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

⁷Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 17 Feb. 2020.

school early, after at most a couple of years of formal learning, and both came from families that would have been considered poor by Mexico's, or Oaxaca's, or even Tlaxiaco's governing elite.⁸ Still, it was a difference big enough to be perceptible in the couple's wedding picture. 'My dad', one of their sons told me, 'when he got married, he got married in his shabby trousers. In his shabby shirt. In sandals. And my mother, [she was wearing] a skirt, a dress that was more or less decent. And shoes.'⁹ The wedding photo is the only surviving image of Palemón, and many years later – long after her husband's death – Merced took it to a photographer to have it enlarged. She also asked the photographer to add colour to the black-and-white photograph. And she asked him to blot out her husband's Indian sandals, to replace them with 'proper' shoes.

Militant Son

This article is not about Palemón and Merced but about the childhood of one of their sons: Raúl Javier Gatica Bautista. Born in Tlaxiaco in 1963, and growing up in precarious circumstances, Raúl went on to become a teacher, writer, and activist in Oaxaca's Indigenous social movements. For a time, he was one of a handful of Oaxacan grassroots leaders with tangible power. He survived torture and assassination attempts. He mobilised tens of thousands. He sat across the negotiating table from three different governors, all of whom, he believes, wanted him dead. It was because of the courage and efforts of leaders like him that Indigenous peasants became a potent force in Oaxacan state politics, to the disgust of Oaxaca's political class. When, in 2005, Raúl was forced into political exile (he had spent most of the previous year in hiding), the state's then-governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, 'spent the whole night celebrating in a bar in Mexico City', according to a journalistic report.¹⁰

Palemón and Merced's son, in short, is a person of historical interest. He did not control the fate of nations or singlehandedly change the course of even Oaxaca's political future. His contributions to history are difficult to measure. And yet those contributions were of a kind that powerfully caught the attention of contemporary observers. With his activism he expanded the reach, and vivified the practice, of the militant edge of the non-state associations that between the 1980s and early 2000s pushed Mexico towards gradual democratic reform, and whose role in the defeat of authoritarianism in Latin America scholars were at the time beginning to discuss under the heading of 'civil society'.¹¹ In Oaxaca, an

⁸Palemón had completed one or two years of primary school. Merced had left primary school after a few days or at most weeks of instruction because she could not reconcile schoolwork with her household tasks: phone interview with Virginia Gregorio, 8 April 2020.

⁹Interview with José Gatica, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 30 Oct. 2019.

¹⁰Diego Osorno, *Oaxaca sitiada: La primera insurrección del siglo XXI* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2007), pp. 31–2.

¹¹Contributions to that large discussion include Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Alberto J. Olvera (ed.), *La sociedad civil: De la teoría a la realidad* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1999); Philip Oxhorn, *Sustaining Civil Society: Economic Change, Democracy, and the Social Construction of Citizenship in Latin America* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2011); Jeffrey Rubin, *Decentering the Regime: Ethnicity, Radicalism, and Democracy in Juchitán, Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Sonia E. Alvarez, Jeffrey W. Rubin, Millie

insurrection broke out in 2006 – the year after Raúl had gone into exile – and a coalition of social movements, the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, APPO), for five months came to control the state capital.¹² Raúl became an APPO councillor (*consejero*) in spite of his exile, making him the only recognised APPO leader who was not present in Oaxaca during the insurrection. The uprising was eventually put down by force. But it had dealt a fierce blow to the prestige of Oaxaca's ruling party (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional – Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI – also Mexico's national ruling party between 1929 and 2000) and it contributed to the party's defeat in the state's next gubernatorial elections.

Scholars have adduced various reasons for the emergence of new Latin American social movements in the 1980s, including economic despair, the emergence of political pluralism after an era of dictatorships and the ascendancy in the discourse of the global Left of an intellectual tendency (often associated with the influence of Antonio Gramsci) that recognised civil society as a critical field of political struggle.¹³ These are useful generalisations, and it is not my purpose to dispute them. Instead, by working with oral sources and adopting a biographical approach, I aim to explore more formative sources of political militancy.¹⁴ Historian John

Thayer, Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Agustín Laó-Montes (eds.), *Beyond Civil Society: Activism, Participation, and Protest in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Geoffrey Pleyers and Manuel Garza Zepeda (eds.), *México en movimientos: Resistencias y alternativas* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez/Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 2017).

¹²On the APPO, see Marco Estrada Saavedra, *El pueblo ensaya la revolución: La APPO y el sistema de dominación oaxaqueño* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2016); Carlos Beas Torres (ed.), *La batalla por Oaxaca* (Oaxaca City: Ediciones Yope Power, 2007); Víctor Raúl Martínez Vásquez, *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política: Oaxaca 2006* (Oaxaca City: UABJO-Instituto de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Centro de Apoyo al Movimiento Popular Oaxaqueño, A.C., Educa y Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad, 2007); Lynn Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Berenice Ortega Bayona, “El tiempo nos alcanzó”: Huellas de la Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca en el contexto de la alternancia”, *Estudios Sociológicos*, 35: 103 (2017), pp. 91–117.

¹³David Slater, ‘New Social Movements and Old Political Questions: Rethinking State–Society Relations in Latin American Development’, *International Journal of Political Economy*, 21: 1 (1991), pp. 32–65; Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, ‘Introduction: Theory and Protest in Latin America Today’, in Escobar and Alvarez (eds.), *The Making of Latin American Social Movements: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 1–18; Evelina Dagnino, ‘Culture, Citizenship, and Democracy: Changing Discourses and Practices of the Latin American Left’, and Kay Warren, ‘Indigenous Movements as a Challenge to the Unified Social Movement Paradigm for Guatemala’, in Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar (eds.), *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 33–63 and 165–94; Sonia E. Alvarez, Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Agustín Laó-Montes, Jeffrey W. Rubin and Millie Thayer, ‘Introduction: Interrogating the Civil Society Agenda, Reassessing Uncivic Political Activism’, in Alvarez et al. (eds.), *Beyond Civil Society*, pp. 1–25.

¹⁴For examples of the fruitfulness and versatility of such an approach in the context of twentieth-century Latin American history, see e.g. Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Manuel Llamojha Mitma and Jaymie Patricia Heilman, *Now Peru Is Mine: The Life and Times of a Campesino Activist* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Jeffrey W. Rubin and Emma Sokoloff-Rubin, *Sustaining Activism: A Brazilian Women's Movement and a Father–Daughter Collaboration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Flor de María Salazar Mendoza, *Antonio Rocha Cordero: Etapas inéditas. 1912–2012* (San Luis Potosí: Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, 2014).

French writes that ‘we will never truly understand labor history if we do not grasp the social and psychological dynamics that shaped individuals ... who stood at the center of organized working class and leftist struggle’.¹⁵ It is also through the lives of such individuals that militant political movements are tied to a deep social and cultural past. For all people carry the past inside them: their own history, almost always the history of their parents, and sometimes the history of previous generations. Raúl Gatica, the political firebrand despised and feared by Oaxacan governors, had been a bohemian student, and before that a poor child growing up in a market town in the Mixteca, the son of Palemón and Merced.¹⁶

Here I concentrate on Raúl’s childhood, not his youthful bohemianism. A study of Raúl’s student days would be more historiographically orthodox. Such a study might examine Raúl’s first encounter with militant books and ideas, describe his involvement in student politics and ask how a youth who had always deplored his Mixtec family background came to identify, proudly, as ‘*indio*’. Its main contribution would be to the intellectual history of political radicalism in late-twentieth-century Mexico. A focus on Raúl’s childhood, by contrast, allows me to explore more universal themes. Raúl’s educational trajectory was, if not exceptional, at least atypical for someone of his class and background. But his childhood was in many ways ordinary. It skirted past the peril of abandonment and delinquency that concerned policymakers at the time, and it was at best partially captured by the state institutions whose records provide childhood historians with most of their documentary fodder.¹⁷ And yet Raúl’s childhood illustrates social and cultural patterns that affected a large number of children, not only in southern

¹⁵John D. French, ‘How the Not-So-Powerless Prevail: Industrial Labor Market Demand and the Contours of Militancy in Mid-Twentieth Century São Paulo, Brazil’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 90: 1 (2010), p. 111.

¹⁶Raúl was a student first at a post-secondary school, pre-college Escuela Preparatoria and then at an Escuela Normal Superior or teacher-training college, both in Oaxaca City. On the importance of Escuelas Normales for social mobility in rural, post-revolutionary Mexico, see Alicia Civera Cerecedo, *La escuela como opción de vida: La formación de maestros normalistas rurales en México, 1921–1945* (Mexico City: Colegio Mexiquense, 2008).

¹⁷See most of the contributions to Barbara Potthast and Sandra Carreras (eds.), *Entre la familia, la sociedad y el estado: Niños y jóvenes en América Latina (siglos XIX–XX)* (Madrid: Iberoamericana/Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert Verlag, 2005); Tobias Hecht (ed.), *Minor Omissions: Children in Latin American History and Society* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); and Susana Sosenski and Elena Jackson Albarrán (eds.), *Nuevas miradas a la historia de la infancia en América Latina: Entre prácticas y representaciones* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2012). For studies of twentieth-century Mexican childhoods see also Susana Sosenski, ‘Diversiones malsanas: El cine y la infancia en la ciudad de México en la década de 1920’, *Secuencia*, 66 (2006), pp. 37–64, and ‘Entre prácticas, instituciones y discursos: Trabajadores infantiles en la ciudad de México (1920–1934)’, *Historia Mexicana*, 60: 2 (2010), pp. 1229–80; Ann S. Blum, *Domestic Economies: Family, Work, and Welfare in Mexico City, 1884–1943* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Daniela Lechuga Herrero, ‘Entre el ocio y el trabajo: La infancia popular en las calles de Ciudad de México en la década de 1930’, *Trashumante. Revista Americana de Historia Social*, 17 (2021), pp. 198–218; and Eileen Ford, *Childhood and Modernity in Cold War Mexico City* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018). For rare studies of Mexican childhood that foreground children’s own voices, see Elena Jackson Albarrán, ‘En busca de la voz de los herederos de la Revolución: Un análisis de los documentos producidos por los niños, 1921–1940’, *Relaciones*, 132 (2012), pp. 17–52, and *Seen and Heard in Mexico: Children and Revolutionary Cultural Nationalism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). For an exemplary study of the impact of childhood experiences on generational aesthetic and political sensitivities, see

Mexico but in other parts of Latin America. It also throws light on the making of an 'Indian' identity in a post-revolutionary state that had long tried to overcome the legacy of past racial divisions. My question is how this quite ordinary childhood came to inform such a radical politics.

The Missing Father

Raúl was born on 11 August 1963, the sixth of seven siblings – Refugio, Enriqueta, Elena, José, Martín, Raúl, Palemón – of whom two, Enriqueta and Martín, had died in infancy. Raúl's sister Refugio, more commonly known as Virginia, in part blames the difficult circumstances of Raúl's birth on their father's absence. Merced was in a storage room the family were renting in the centre of Tlaxiaco when she felt the first birth pangs. Surprised by the onset of labour, she sent twelve-year-old Virginia running to alert the rest of the family, including an aunt who was a practised midwife. At some point thereafter Merced left the storage room and sat down in the doorway of a neighbouring house. There, Virginia, Merced's father and the midwife found her just after she had pushed out the baby. The midwife cut the baby's umbilical cord and Merced's father, with the help of a passer-by, carried the exhausted mother inside.¹⁸

Where in all this was Palemón? As the oldest of the siblings, Virginia has the clearest memory of her father. She says that Palemón was not present at Raúl's birth because two weeks earlier he had fallen off a hotel balcony and broken his arm. Their father was by this time no longer working for his in-laws, with whom he had fallen out. Instead, after a stint in a nearby mine, he had gone into business as a market vendor and petty trader. To sell his merchandise he travelled to towns and villages all over the Mixteca. His accident happened in a hotel in Chalcatongo where, at the time of the fall, Virginia later heard, he was cavorting with a woman – an unconfirmed but plausible story about a man with a reputation for cheating and drinking.

Though nobody could know it at the time, Palemón's absence at Raúl's birth prefigured his absence during most of the rest of his son's life, even as it repeated earlier instances of abandonment. For Palemón's unstable lifestyle had burdened the family since long before his tumble from the Chalcatongo balcony. Virginia remembers her father as a man who would go on long drunken binges, sometimes for weeks at a time. During those binges it was as if he forgot that he had a home. He gambled away his money. He slept in the street and begged strangers for hand-outs. 'There were times', remembers Virginia, 'when I cried and told him to stop gambling because we already had enough to live on'. Virginia insists, however, that the real reason for her father's downfall was his generosity. He would win big when luck was on his side but refuse to collect his winnings from people he knew to be as poor as himself. But when he was unlucky, his opponents showed no such restraint. They cleaned him out without mercy.¹⁹

In mid-twentieth-century Mexico, Palemón was not an unusual figure. He was a migrant who, having moved away from his rural origins, was seduced not only by

Mary Kay Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City's Rebel Generation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹⁸Interview with Virginia Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 29 Oct. 2019.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

the opportunities but also by the temptations of urban living. Alcohol, adultery and games of fortune could of course be found in the countryside – by those who went looking for them. But in towns and cities there existed a veritable incitement to diversion. Urban occupations, meanwhile, unlike agricultural work, offered no slack time during which such amusements could be pursued without a cost to the household. For a petty merchant like Palemón, each day not spent peddling his wares was money lost. In the 1940s and 1950s – the decades with the highest rate of urban growth in Mexican history – many town dwellers were in similar situations.²⁰ Families across the nation found themselves coping with the wastefulness of men making merry. It was in those years that anthropologist Oscar Lewis studied the family life of rural migrants in Mexico City and observed ‘a high incidence of alcoholism’ as well as ‘a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of mothers and children’, among other manifestations of what he famously dubbed a ‘culture of poverty’.²¹

Lewis’s ‘culture of poverty’ thesis is still a touchstone for global debates about marginality and urbanisation. Lewis was sceptical about the ability of rural migrants to find a foothold in the city: in that regard, his thinking reflected the pessimism of other urban scholars, past and present.²² Unlike some urban pessimists, however, Lewis saw in the ‘culture’ of the poor more a reflection than a cause of their alienation.²³ Behind what he viewed as the poor’s profligacy – behind the alcoholism and pleasure-seeking and fatherless households – he detected a mixture of state neglect and justified mistrust of ‘the values and institutions of the dominant classes’. He thought the poor were cynical but not stupid. Their ‘mistrust of

²⁰On urban growth rates in twentieth-century Mexico, see Gustavo Garza, *La urbanización de México en el siglo XX* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2003), pp. 30–3, table 4.

²¹Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, 50th anniversary edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), pp. xxxviii–xxxix. See also Lewis’s earlier treatment of the ‘culture of poverty’ among poor Mexican families in *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959). Both books represented a departure from Lewis’s initial more optimistic assessment of the ability of rural migrants to make a life in the city in ‘Urbanization without Breakdown: A Case Study’, *The Scientific Monthly*, 75: 1 (1952), pp. 31–41. That study had argued against overemphasis on ‘the negative aspects [of rural–urban migration], such as personal maladjustment, breakdown of family life, decline of religion, and increase of delinquency’ (p. 31). On the development of Lewis’s thinking on urban poverty, see Emilio de Antuñano, ‘Mexico City as an Urban Laboratory: Oscar Lewis, the “Culture of Poverty” and the Transnational History of the Slum’, *Journal of Urban History*, 45: 4 (2019), pp. 813–30.

²²For overviews of twentieth-century urban theory, see Brodwyn Fischer, ‘A Century in the Present Tense: Crisis, Politics, and the Intellectual History of Brazil’s Informal Cities’, in Fischer, Bryan McCann and Javier Auyero (eds.), *Cities From Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 9–67, and Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, ‘The Rise of Megacities and the Urbanization of Informality, Exclusion and Violence’, in Koonings and Kruijt (eds.), *Mega-Cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South* (New York: Zed Books, 2009), pp. 8–27.

²³Lewis’s view was thus considerably more nuanced than those of US scholars and policymakers who used his thesis to deplore the values of poor, Black families in the United States. For discussions of the global reception of Lewis’s work see Fischer, ‘A Century in the Present Tense’, pp. 33–40, de Antuñano, ‘Mexico City as an Urban Laboratory’ and Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, ‘Other Americas: Transnationalism, Scholarship, and the Culture of Poverty in Mexico and the United States’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 89: 4 (2009), pp. 603–41.

government' gave to their culture 'a counter quality and a potential for being used in political movements aimed against the existing social order'.²⁴

Was it in part this 'counter quality' of the culture of the poor that came to inform Raúl's political militancy? It is a plausible hypothesis, for Raúl's family experience replicated elements of Lewis's 'culture of poverty' besides the father's alcoholism and his periodic neglect of the family. There was the remoteness of state services, as evidenced in Raúl's lonely birth in a doorway. There was, as we will see, the proclivity for parental violence. There was the casual attitude the family assumed before the state's administrative apparatus. For example, Raúl's patronymic is Gatica, when standard Hispanic naming practice would make it Gregorio – an oddity he shares with two of his siblings. The reason for this mistake, says Virginia, is that whenever her father and grandfather went to have the birth of a child recorded, they were festively inebriated.²⁵

And yet the culture-of-poverty thesis fails to illuminate the larger trajectory of Raúl's life, or indeed of the lives of his siblings. Lewis assumed that the marginality of the poor was passed from parents to children, that poor migrants to the city became the first link in a generational chain of poverty and alienation. But this is not what happened with Palemón and Merced's children. Virginia was the only sibling to end her education early: all the others completed at least secondary school. And all of the siblings, Virginia included, would go on to achieve modest levels of middle-class prosperity.²⁶ Economically and educationally, the siblings seemed to vindicate, not give the lie to, the aspirations of Mexico's mid-century developmentalist state.

The culture-of-poverty thesis also fails to do Palemón justice. For when he emerged from his drunken binges, Raúl's father always picked himself up. He always transformed back into a conscientious and hardworking man. Over time, he slowly advanced his career and his family's fortunes. From working in his in-laws' brickmaking workshop, he moved first into a job as a miner and then into various business ventures. From a hut woven from sticks and plastered with mud, he moved his family into a wooden one-room house with an outside kitchen shed and a plot of land at the back.²⁷ He sent his children to school and insisted that they do well. A playful and affectionate father, Palemón could turn violent when he caught his children missing classes or suspected them of some dishonesty. At least twice he beat Virginia so badly that she 'came down with a fever': once so that she would apply herself better at arithmetic (an important subject for a trader's daughter) and once when he suspected her of having stolen a *peso*. 'The day I die', he said, 'I don't want to be talked about because my children are thieves. I want to be talked about for the good things my children are doing.'²⁸

²⁴Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez*, p. xxxix.

²⁵Interview with Virginia Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 12 Nov. 2019.

²⁶Virginia and Palemón carried on their parents' trade as petty merchants, while José and Raúl became teachers (José after first working for some years as a veterinarian). In his subsidised, single-room Vancouver flat, Raúl probably leads the most materially modest life of the siblings, as he pours the majority of his money and energy into his political work, now on behalf of Latin American migrant workers in Canada.

²⁷Interview with José Gatica, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 30 Oct. 2019.

²⁸Interview with Virginia Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 29 Oct. 2019.

In the end, it was Palemón's habit of work, and not his drinking or gambling, that took him to a premature death. Having first established himself as a market vendor, he started, in a modest way, to get into the wholesale business. He travelled to Oaxaca City, buying produce and small livestock for the Tlaxiaco market, and was making a handsome profit. On one of the return journeys to Tlaxiaco, Palemón was sitting in the back of a passenger truck on top of a large crate of eggs (in high demand in Tlaxiaco, where the yolks were used for making a specialty bread), when the truck rolled over and the crate crushed his head. While Palemón was the only passenger to die in the accident, his wife Merced, who was sitting beside him, sustained major injuries. She would spend the next six months convalescing in a Oaxaca City hospital. It was at this point that thirteen-year-old Virginia dropped out of primary school. 'If you don't work, if you don't bring in money, your brothers and sisters won't eat', her grandmother told her.²⁹ Virginia was now responsible for feeding and taking care of three younger siblings of whom Raúl, not yet two, was the littlest. She would not return to the classroom.

Childhood

What I know about Palemón and Merced, I know from talking to their children. What I know about Raúl's childhood, I know from talking to Raúl. There are some other sources. Interviews with Raúl's siblings, cousins and aunts and uncles have provided anecdotes and remarkably uniform character sketches of the boy: he was restless and naughty, *inquieta* and *travieso*, those who then knew him invariably recall.³⁰ Those interviews have also allowed me to confirm, and sometimes to sharpen, my knowledge of the external circumstances of Raúl's upbringing: of living arrangements, social relations, the day-to-day structure of life. But only Raúl experienced his childhood from up close. No one else was in a position to pay much attention.

Raúl is also the only person who can address his childhood's subjective dimensions. Only he knows what it felt like to be him. Only he knows which of the places, people and episodes of childhood, a good 50 years later, remain scorched in his memory. Oral historians have long argued that the 'tricks' memory can play – its biases, confusions, blind spots, and sometimes outright errors – are not merely a liability for historical research. They are also a resource. They can lead, as Alessandro Portelli has famously put it, 'through and beyond facts to their meanings'.³¹ And if, on a factual level, Raúl's testimony offers a valuable portrait of a particular kind of childhood in miracle-era Mexico (a portrait that other studies might always complement, challenge, or complicate), then on a subjective level it offers no less valuable insights into the meanings that, as an adult, Raúl would impose on his past. Raúl's testimony thus demands our attention for its artifice as well as its rawness.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*; interviews with Josefa Bautista and Benito Jiménez, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 30 Oct. 2019; Clemencia Bautista, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 3 Nov. 2019; José Gatica, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 30 Oct. 2019; and Palemón Gregorio (Raúl's brother), Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 5 Nov. 2019.

³¹Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 2.

Raúl Gatica: On the day of the exam, I remember mum was making her tortillas. I won't forget that day. Because my mother was giving me something to eat and she was scolding me. She says, 'You're going to pass that test, eh? Oh, you're going to take the test, *cabrón*. And *cabrón*, make sure that you pass. Because if you don't pass, I'll beat you black and blue, *cabrón*.' She showed me one of those quince-wood rods, the ones that really hurt and don't break. She says, 'Look *cabrón*, here I'm keeping your meal for you. Eat well, *cabrón*, if you don't pass the test, right here I'll be beating you black and blue, *cabrón*.'³²

Palemón's death plunged Raúl's family into a poverty that would define the boy's growth into consciousness. For a while, the family barely scraped by. Virginia now operated her father's market stand in Tlaxiaco. Merced, once she was able to leave the hospital, gave birth to the last of Palemón's children, a boy named after his deceased father. Then she went to work with a vengeance. Purchasing supplies in Oaxaca City on Tuesdays, she spent the rest of the week trekking between various towns in the Tlaxiaco district – Chalcatongo, Mixtepec, Magdalena, Chicahuaxtla – to sell her wares in local markets. She often slept away from home, leaving the children to fend for themselves.

As Raúl grew from an infant into a boy, he was expected to pull his weight in the household: to clean, look after his smaller siblings (his mum had two additional children with another man), feed the family's pigs and chickens, package his mother's merchandise. All household chores were made more difficult by the absence of light and running water. Indeed, the children's most hated chore was to carry up water from the bottom of the hill, ensuring that a 200-litre barrel was always well filled. If Merced returned home and found the barrel low on water, she would make the children get up and fill it then and there – no matter how late it was or how terrified they were of the darkness that lay between the house and the river.³³

Because she was so infrequently at home, Merced meted out exemplary, memorable punishments. She at all times kept a rope submerged in a bucket of water, making it heavy and hard. She also used other instruments to inflict pain: sometimes a belt, sometimes a wire cable. When she beat the children, she might target their backs or their buttocks, but above all she aimed at their legs and feet. All parents in San Miguelito sometimes physically punished their children, but few did so as hard as Merced. Few did so as often. 'At least in other families, the parents would talk to the children before beating them', Raúl remembers. 'But not my mother. She would beat us first, then she would talk.'³⁴

When, at eight or nine years of age, Raúl began to hang out in the street instead of going to school, Merced responded by asking her *compadre* (godfather to her daughter Virginia) Macario Ramos, Tlaxiaco's municipal president, to put Raúl in jail. Ramos at first refused the request, saying that he couldn't jail a child. 'Then do me justice and punish him', Virginia remembers her mother pleading.

³²Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 24 Feb. 2017.

³³Interviews with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016 and 24 Feb. 2017; José Gatica, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 30 Oct. 2019; and Palemón Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 5 Nov. 2019.

³⁴Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016.

'Lock him in [the basement under] the bandstand for two, three days so he'll learn and go to school.'³⁵ And thus it was done. Ramos ordered his municipal policemen to pick Raúl up at a convenience store where the boy liked to spend time reading comic books. The next three days Raúl remained locked in the dark, damp storage room underneath the town's bandstand, wrapped in the blankets his siblings brought him, too angry to eat anything. Then even his anger could no longer sustain him and he promised to return to his classes.³⁶

Raúl Gatica: Beginning in second grade [around age seven] I went to school in the mornings. But in the mornings the people who went were more well off, more from the centre of town. And in those days the teachers wanted to impose cleanliness. They agreed to have cleanliness competitions. And for the people who came from the centre it was more or less easy, even though there were no paved roads, because Tlaxiaco was still a backwater. But at any rate they didn't have to walk for one and a half hours, they didn't have to go through the *monte* [countryside]. And they generally were clean when they arrived. And I was also clean. But the mud always spattered me even though I took off my sandals, I washed my feet when crossing the river, but something always happened. I would slip, there was always some reason that my trousers got dirty, or my sandals had mud on them, or my feet were cracked, because when you walk in sandals your feet crack. In short, we never won the cleanliness competition – and it was my fault. I remember the son of the bank manager, I will never forget his name, he always said: 'We lost the competition because of that dirty Indian Raúl.' And other kids called me the same thing. In other words, 'because of that damn swinish Indian'. And it's very hurtful. When those kids had not the slightest fucking idea how hard I tried to arrive at school clean.³⁷

Raúl's primary school held separate morning and afternoon classes, the latter for students from outlying hamlets who in the mornings were put to work by their parents. Raúl at first attended the afternoon classes. This allowed him to tag along with his brother José and sister Elena, who were by then seasoned students. José and Elena's classes ended hours after those of their little brother, and at the end of his school day Raúl would slip into his siblings' classroom and, on most days, nod off while seated up front, next to their kindly teacher.³⁸ After his first year as a pupil, however, José and Elena went on to high school and the boy was on his own. He now attended the school's morning sessions, rubbing elbows with the children of Tlaxiaco's professional classes – children whose parents owned shops or worked in banks or offices. It was from his new classmates that Raúl learned that he was not merely poor but '*indio*'.

³⁵Interview with Virginia Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 29 Oct. 2019.

³⁶Interviews with José Gatica, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 30 Oct. 2019, Virginia Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 29 Oct. 2019, Palemón Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 5 Nov. 2019, and Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016 and 16 Feb. 2020.

³⁷Interviews with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016 and 16 Feb. 2020.

³⁸Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016.

Among his new classmates, Raúl inevitably stood out. He was darker and shorter than them. He came to school in hand-me-down clothes. His feet and trousers were often spattered with mud, causing his team to lose in the school's weekly cleanliness competitions. Because of his 'funny' way of speaking Spanish, his teachers at first sat him in a special row for Indigenous students (there were two or three others) who were made to work on their pronunciation. Where his classmates ate sandwiches made with squishy white 'Bimbo' bread – which to Raúl seemed like the height of culinary luxury – his own school lunches consisted of bean-smearred tortillas and invited the hilarity of some of his classmates. Raúl was an excellent student and a highly sociable child who had no trouble making friends. Nevertheless he was constantly taunted: for his looks, his food, his dirtiness, the way he spoke Spanish. 'There's that damn *indio*, the one who doesn't know how to talk', his classmates would call to each other. Over time, Raúl learned to respond to such taunts with his fists. He became known as a tough guy and brawler.³⁹

Raúl didn't enjoy getting into fights, nor to constantly walk around with his guard up. Sourcing on the idea of school, he started roaming Tlaxiaco's streets instead of going to classes. When challenged by his mother, he simply said that the journey to school was too long. 'All right then', Merced told her boy. 'If you think it's so far, I'll find you a place to stay that's closer.' And she asked the wealthy store owner, Don Lucas Martínez, to take Raúl in. Raúl's brother Palemón mentions another reason why Merced may have sent her son to live with Lucas Martínez: it was 'so that he would be in a place where she expected he would be treated with a firm hand'. Don Lucas was known to be a stern boss. In exchange for letting her boy work as a servant in the store and family home, Merced asked only that he be fed and sent to school in the morning.⁴⁰

Raúl Gatica: It was there that I started to hate birthdays. It was there that I started to hate parties. Because I had to wash the dishes, I had to do everything while the guests were there. They had people who did the cooking, Indigenous like me, who, with that complicity that existed between us, would give me a taco. Complicity between Indians. But when it was the birthday of the masters or of their children, they gave parties. And so the cousins would come, the brothers, the nieces and nephews, the in-laws – and everybody ordered me around. 'Let's see, fucking *indio*, hurry up, get me more food, take those plates away.' And everybody hit me. Everybody pushed me around and kicked me. Everybody beat me. In short, that's where I learned to hate parties. Whenever there was a party there were more people who attacked me, more people who ordered me around, more plates to wash, more tables to clean, more work. And do you think we were invited to the party? No! We were the Indians working our asses off.⁴¹

Raúl estimates that he lived with Don Lucas for four to six months. He may have been eight or nine years old at the time. The tasks he performed in that period

³⁹Interviews with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016 and 16 Feb. 2020.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, and interview with Palemón Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 5 Nov. 2019.

⁴¹Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016.

included cleaning, shelf-stocking and running sundry errands. As a servant or domestic, the boy was unprotected by any of the country's progressive labour legislation: domestics, according to Mexican lawmakers, worked in a realm of affective relationships that stood apart from the exploitation of the marketplace.⁴² Raúl experienced in the store and in the Martínez house a kind of synthesis of Merced's disciplinary violence and the racism at school. The Martínez family, like most of Tlaxiaco's elites, claimed a Hispanic descentance. And while the family may certainly have contained its smattering of Indigenous ancestors, Raúl insists that they really were 'white', or 'Spanish', in more than a notional sense. They also looked white. The short and dark-skinned boy, by contrast, looked unmistakably Indian.⁴³ The family found it easy to treat Raúl as a different breed of human, calling him '*indio*' as a slur – not habitually but whenever they were unsatisfied with his work. If he overslept, they sometimes beat him awake.

During large family gatherings, such as birthday parties, the consumption of alcohol – and, perhaps, the presence of an audience of sorts – further lowered inhibitions. The boy was shoved and knocked around. He was freely insulted. But at least those occasions were sporadic. On a day-to-day basis, the worst part of Raúl's routine came at five or six in the morning, when he dragged himself out of bed to sweep the pavement in front of the building. The place was a common sleeping area for peasants spending the night in Tlaxiaco, and Raúl hated what he had to do first: wake up the sleepers and tell them to be off. 'Get those *indios* out of here', Don Lucas would tell him. 'I don't want any *indios* in the arcades in front of my store.'⁴⁴

Notwithstanding his age, Raúl was already too independent to put up long with the mistreatment he experienced in the Martínez establishment. Some months after his mother had arranged the position, he was back at home. And soon he again started skipping classes. To avoid his mum, he slept at relatives' houses, or on a piece of cardboard in the town's bus depot. He started doing odd jobs: cleaning vehicles, carrying luggage. On market days he helped unload the trucks that brought in the produce. Sometimes he went on long-distance bus rides as a fare collector and all-round assistant – journeying to Mexico City, spending days, perhaps weeks away from Tlaxiaco. The streets which connected Tlaxiaco to a wide-open world were for Raúl a path of escape: from violence, forced work, any kind of imposed discipline.⁴⁵ This does not mean that the streets were untouched by racist contempt: the drivers the boy worked for might hit him and call him a 'stupid

⁴²Mexican courts, furthermore, frequently ruled that workers employed in domestic-adjacent businesses but living in their employers' households fell under the legal category of domestic workers. Sara Hidalgo, 'The Making of a "Simple Domestic": Domestic Workers, the Supreme Court, and the Law in Postrevolutionary Mexico', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 94 (2018), pp. 55–79.

⁴³Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016. The social, cultural and racial pretensions of Tlaxiaco's leading families are described in Marroquín (ed.), *La ciudad mercado*.

⁴⁴Interviews with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016 and 17 Feb. 2020.

⁴⁵Historians of childhood in post-revolutionary Mexico City have noted the frequency with which poor children appropriated public spaces, where it was often possible to combine informal labour with a measure of freedom and diversion. Sosenski, 'Entre prácticas, instituciones y discursos'; Lechuga Herrero, 'Entre el ocio y el trabajo'.

indio', just as Lucas Martínez had done.⁴⁶ But on the streets it was possible to walk away from unpleasant situations.

Raúl Gatica: At first I escaped for a month, then I went back to school for two months, and then I escaped, I didn't go back to school. And since there used to be a lot of wilderness, it was possible to hide. And since I had a lot of family, one day I went to stay with my grandma, another day with my other grandma, another day I stayed with my uncle. And they always said, 'Go, son, your mum is looking for you.' And they didn't want any problems with my mum, because my mum was very, very serious. My mum was capable of coming to my granddad's house and giving him a beating. She was very bad-tempered, my mum. But my uncles or my grandparents couldn't tell me not to sleep at their place. They couldn't tell me that they wouldn't give me something to eat, they just couldn't do it, they always gave me something. But they always said, 'Son, go back to your mum, your mum is looking for you.'⁴⁷

Tlaxiaco's public spaces were Raúl's ultimate realm of freedom. They were where he played with siblings and friends: soccer and basketball, marbles and spinning tops. The relationship between the children was often affectionate but could also create its own hierarchies. When Natalia, a homeless girl with a learning disability, appeared in Tlaxiaco's streets (nobody knew whence), the boys' interactions with the girl were both playful and aggressive. They chased her around the clock tower in Tlaxiaco's main square, and let her chase them in turn, to the delight of all involved. But they also shot at her with rubber bands they let fly from their hands. They mocked her and erased the drawings she made in the dirt. As an adult, Raúl would memorialise Natalia in a short story that ends with the girl's rape and murder at the hands of an unknown stranger. The ending affords the lightly fictionalised group of boys an opportunity to regret their small cruelties while exempting them from the shocking, incomprehensible violence of the world of adults.⁴⁸ But in reality, Natalia wasn't raped or murdered. At least there is no indication that she was: she simply stopped showing up, her departure as unexplained as had been her arrival.⁴⁹

Raúl experienced his most profound sense of freedom not with his friends but alone, in Doña Guillermina's convenience store, just a stone's throw from the store of Lucas Martínez. Doña Guillermina sold household items and served beer and *aguardiente* to customers who came in for a quick drink. What drew in the boy, though, was her business of renting out comic books. For five or ten *centavos*, Raúl could sit down with a magazine and disappear into a dazzling variety of strange and exhilarating worlds. While the boy read all manner of comics – funny tales, sad tales, pious tales – it was the adventure stories he liked above all. *Kalimán*, for example, told of the deeds of an Egyptian superhero whose powers of

⁴⁶Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 12 April 2019.

⁴⁷Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016.

⁴⁸Raúl Gatica, 'Natalia', in *Personajes prestados / Borrowed Characters* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Antropológicos, Científicos, Artísticos, Tradicionales y Lingüísticos, 2009), p. 57.

⁴⁹Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016.

mind allowed him to bring his body into a death-like trance and emerge unharmed from the most difficult scrapes. *Fantomás* was a highly cultured masked thief who committed heists around the world, introducing readers to different countries with each new adventure. His stolen treasure he gave to the poor.⁵⁰ For a boy like Raúl, battered at home and bullied at school, Doña Guillermina's store functioned as a portal into alternate worlds that were at once carefree and infinitely exciting.

The Politics of Memory

Raúl's narrative offers a wealth of concrete, empirical insights into the history of childhood in provincial mid-twentieth-century Mexico. But what can it tell us about the relationship between Raúl's early years and his later radical politics? The question can be addressed without claiming special psychological insight. I am interested in Raúl's childhood not as a reservoir of hidden compulsions but as a source of ideas that came to inspire and power his militancy. Some of those ideas may have emerged from his childhood directly. Others may have come to him upon later reflection, perhaps because of a burgeoning political interest. Just as Raúl's childhood informed his political militancy, in other words, so his militancy may have informed how he remembers his childhood.⁵¹ In either case Raúl's childhood was foundational to his political thought – a source of experience about his place in society that would invest his politics with a bitter emotional urgency.

Before analysing the major themes in Raúl's childhood narrative, I want to briefly consider what that narrative leaves out or, at least, what it relegates to the margins. Raúl's account of his childhood is remarkably light on any discussion of material deprivation. The kind of scarcity that we most readily associate with poverty was barely a topic in our interviews until I brought it up. Then Raúl talked about the discomfort of going hungry, about the cracked feet he got from wearing only sandals in Tlaxiaco's mountain cold. But being hungry was inconvenient rather than existentially threatening: his mother always had a bag of *totopos* (tortilla chips) hanging from a rafter, and there were meals for the asking in the homes of various relatives. The cracked feet were treated with animal grease. Other dimensions of poverty – the lack of privacy, the crowded sleeping arrangements – at the time seemed unremarkable rather than bothersome.⁵²

Raúl's childhood memories neglect the issue of scarcity and instead relentlessly circle around two closely linked motifs:⁵³ race and abuse. Raúl describes growing up in an environment completely ordered by racial thought. 'To be *indio* was to be dirty, to be bad, to be dense, to be stupid', he remembers. 'Someone who dresses badly is an *indio*, someone who eats badly is an *indio*, someone who walks badly

⁵⁰On Mexican comic books in this era see Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

⁵¹For discussions about memory as a historical source, see e.g. Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 125–9, 133–4, 143–4, and James, *Doña María's Story*.

⁵²Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 17 Feb. 2020.

⁵³By 'motif' I mean a category of thought that is generative rather than precise, less an idea than a cluster of patterned perceptions from which different ideas might be made.

is an *indio*.⁵⁴ Such attitudes were by no means confined to the regional elite whose children Raúl went to school with. They penetrated Raúl's domestic environment. In his San Miguelito home, Mixtec – the childhood tongue of at least two of his grandparents – was never spoken, and the children grew up without understanding more than a few words of the language. Raúl's maternal grandmother was especially adamant in proscribing the use of Mixtec. She was, says Raúl, a racist, an *indígena ladinizada* (assimilated native) obsessed with rooting out any traces of Indigenous culture in her family.⁵⁵

The racial attitudes Raúl encountered at home were typical expressions of the Mexican ideology of *mestizaje*. In the second decade of the twentieth century the nation had been shaken by a social revolution whose victors vowed to lift Indigenous people from what they perceived to be many centuries of social submission. They declared race, if not a fiction, then at least an irrelevance. Mexico, they said, was to become a mixed-race nation with equal opportunities for all.⁵⁶ An intense educational effort aimed to bury the country's ethnic divisions underneath a single national culture. Schoolteachers became modern missionaries, teaching their pupils not only maths or biology but also new ways of thinking.⁵⁷ They inspected their

⁵⁴Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 17 Feb. 2020.

⁵⁵Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016. A similar dynamic is described in Susana Drucker's ethnography of a Oaxacan town, *Cambio de indumentaria: La estructura social y el abandono de la vestimenta indígena en la villa de Santiago Jamiltepec* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1963), pp. 41–5.

⁵⁶While some Mexican anthropologists developed a more radical *indigenismo*, defending the value of cultural pluralism rather than assimilation, their position did not become part of the political mainstream: Luis Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México*, 3rd edition (Mexico City: Colegio de México/Colegio Nacional/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), pp. 228–57; Paula López Caballero, 'Anthropological Debates around the Indigenous Subject and Alterity, 1940–1948', and Diana Lynn Schwartz, 'Displacement, Development, and the Creation of a Modern Indígena in the Papaloapan, 1940s–1970s', in Paula López Caballero and Ariadna Acevedo-Rodrigo (eds.), *Beyond Alterity: Destabilizing the Indigenous Other in Mexico* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2018), pp. 199–221 and 222–43; Alan Knight, 'Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910–1940', in Richard Graham (ed.), *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 71–113; María L. O. Muñoz, *Stand up and Fight: Participatory Indigenismo, Populism, and Mobilization in Mexico, 1970–1984* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2016), chap. 2; Stephen E. Lewis, *Rethinking Mexican Indigenismo: The INI's Coordinating Center in Highland Chiapas and the Fate of a Utopian Project* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2018); A. S. Dillingham, *Oaxaca Resurgent: Indigeneity, Development, and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).

⁵⁷In the first two decades after the revolution a full 10 per cent of Mexico's federal budget was allocated to the Ministry of Education: Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997); Stephen E. Lewis, 'The Nation, Education, and the "Indian Problem" in Mexico, 1920–1940', in Lewis and Mary Kay Vaughan (eds.), *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 176–94; Engracia Loyo, 'El conocimiento del indio: Nuevo camino para su asimilación (1930–1940)', in María Bertely Busquets (ed.), *Historias, saberes indígenas y nuevas etnicidades en la escuela* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2006), pp. 69–94; Alexander S. Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2004); Nathaniel Morris, *Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans: Indigenous Communities and the State in Mexico's Gran Nayar, 1910–1940* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2020), chap. 3 and 5.

pupils' cleanliness.⁵⁸ They taught Indigenous kids to speak Spanish and, sometimes, attacked them for using their native languages. In some communities near Tlaxiaco, for example, children caught speaking Mixtec in the classroom were physically castigated.⁵⁹ This intense educational effort probably contributed to the decline of Indigenous-language use in the country. In the Mixteca region, Mixtec was reported as the primary language of 54 per cent of inhabitants in 1940, but of only 39 per cent of inhabitants ten years later.⁶⁰ 'What happened to such a considerable number of people?', asked the distinguished anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán in 1957. His answer epitomised the ideology of the revolution and the state it had created. 'Nothing bad to be sure: they became Mexican peasants. They entered into the great national community by abandoning their traditional language and adopting the official language of the republic.'⁶¹

Raúl's narrative reveals the constant self-discipline required of Indigenous Mexicans who wanted to become part of Aguirre's 'great national community'.⁶² The emotional cost of that ambition is evidenced by his mother's abusiveness, described by Raúl as terrifying, relentless and unrelieved by contrasting displays of affection. Raúl contrasts Merced's habitual harshness with the sweetness of manner typical of his father's side of the family, which remained entirely Mixtec in cultural orientation. While he concedes that his father's relatives may also have sometimes used a belt on their children, coercion was not the foundation of their child-rearing methods, and they were capable, as his mother was not, of showing their children love and affection.⁶³ Merced had no time for shows of affection. She was a violent parent because she was consumed by an idea. Her children would do well in school. They would find professional success, grow into mestizo cultural habits. They would leave the 'indio' behind. The epistemic violence inherent in this project is perfectly encapsulated in Merced's decision, late in life, to have her wedding picture doctored: to erase her husband's 'Indian' sandals and put a pair of shoes on his feet. When she presented the new picture to Raúl, who was then in his late twenties and had requested a copy of the photo, she tried to explain her decision: 'Look, son, you're now a teacher and your brother is a doctor, so I thought your dad would look better that way.'⁶⁴

⁵⁸See Ariadna Acevedo Rodrigo, 'Las apariencias importan: Indumentaria e higiene personal como marcas de civilización y ciudadanía en la educación para campesinos e indígenas, México, ca. 1921–1943', in Ariadna Acevedo Rodrigo and Paula López Caballero (eds.), *Ciudadanos inesperados: Espacios de formación de la ciudadanía ayer y hoy* (Mexico City: Cinvestav/Colegio de México, 2012), pp. 131–66, and Patience Schell, 'Nationalizing Children through Schools and Hygiene: Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexico City', *The Americas*, 60: 4 (2004), pp. 559–87.

⁵⁹Dillingham, *Oaxaca Resurgent*, p. 54.

⁶⁰Aguirre Beltrán, 'El problema humano de las Mixtecas', p. 18.

⁶¹*Ibid.* The first director of Mexico's National Indigenist Institute, Alfonso Caso, in 1953 similarly proclaimed the need for 'achieving the social and cultural unity of all Mexicans'. Quoted in Lewis, *Rethinking Mexican Indigenismo*, p. 7.

⁶²That effort of vigilance and self-discipline also comes through in anthropological accounts, e.g. Drucker, *Cambio de indumentaria*; Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan: A Study of Forced Identity in Contemporary Mexico* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1975); Gregory G. Reck, *In the Shadow of Tlaloc: Life in a Mexican Village* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1978).

⁶³Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016.

⁶⁴Phone interview with Raúl Gatica, 4 June 2020. Raúl was at the time teaching at a teachers' college. His brother José was a veterinarian.

If the abuse Raúl suffered at home was born of ambition, the abuse he encountered at school had the opposite aim: to keep him in his place. The racial contempt of some of his classmates came to Raúl as a shock. After all, he had grown up speaking Spanish and not thought of himself as Indian. Under the gaze of his peers, however, he soon began to internalise their opinions. ‘The worst of it was that I thought he was right’, Raúl says about the racist invective hurled at him by the bank manager’s son. He did, after all, come to school dirty. His legs were spattered with mud when those of his classmates were not.⁶⁵ The school’s weekly cleanliness competitions thus had the effect of turning difference into character. They seemed to confirm that Raúl was ‘*indio*’ and that what distinguished him from the other boys – his short physique, dark skin, sub-par clothes and lunches, ‘incorrect’ way of speaking Spanish – were signs of a moral deficiency.

Raúl’s school experience illustrates a type of racial discrimination that was rife at all levels of Mexican society: even within families, darker-skinned children were (and are) often slighted on account of their skin tone.⁶⁶ In Tlaxiaco, furthermore, Raúl moved among a social class whose members barely acknowledged that Mexico had gone through a revolution. For Oaxaca was not a state in which the Mexican Revolution had found much support. Among certain social groups, it had met with outright rejection: in 1915 a powerful elite faction had declared Oaxaca an autonomous republic rather than submit to any part of the revolutionary coalition that had defeated Victoriano Huerta, a counter-revolutionary dictator. Unable to defend the state capital, the separatists had taken to the mountains and, for four years, had established their rival government in an important regional trading hub: Tlaxiaco.⁶⁷ At least a few of the grandchildren of Oaxaca’s counter-revolutionary separatists must have been among the kids Raúl went to school with. If ‘[t]o use an insult is to cite the past’, as Didier Eribon has written, then the racial insults used by some of Raúl’s classmates may perhaps be read as a childish echo of their grandparents’ reactionary project.⁶⁸ They were subconscious and inarticulate expressions of ‘an urgent need to defend the physical and ideological spaces’ of racial supremacy against any attempt at social levelling associated with the post-revolutionary state.⁶⁹

⁶⁵Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 16 Feb. 2020.

⁶⁶Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa, ‘Historically Rooted Transnationalism: Slightedness and the Experience of Racism in Mexican Families’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 29: 3 (2008), pp. 293–5, and ‘Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism’, *Ethnicities*, 10: 3 (2010), p. 394. Reports about appearance-based racial prejudice also pepper the anthropological and oral-history literature on Mexican everyday culture: see e.g. Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez*, pp. 23–4, 63, 65, 68, 110; Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan*, pp. 4–5; Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter*, p. 56.

⁶⁷Ronald Waterbury, ‘Non-Revolutionary Peasants: Oaxaca Compared to Morelos in the Mexican Revolution’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17: 4 (1975), pp. 410–42; Francisco José Ruiz Cervantes, *La revolución en Oaxaca: El movimiento de la soberanía (1915–1920)* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986); Margarita Dalton, *Breve historia de Oaxaca* (Mexico City: Colegio de México/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), pp. 228–35.

⁶⁸‘It [the insult] only has meaning because it has been used by so many earlier speakers’, Eribon continues. Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, trans. Michael Lucey (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2013), p. 198.

⁶⁹Mary Weismantel, *Cholas and Pishtacos: Stories of Race and Sex in the Andes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 14.

Raúl's account of racial abuse finds its climax in Lucas Martínez's store and home where for a few months he worked as a child servant. At school, Raúl could at least use his fists to earn the respect of his peers. But in the Martínez establishment, he could not use his fists. Here he was purely at the receiving end of the family's violence. Raúl imputes no overt political motives to the storeowner – nor political consciousness to his eight- or nine-year-old self – yet his narrative about the time he spent with the Martínez family has the simplicity and transparency of a political parable. He describes the store as a space where the use of disciplinary violence continued a centuries-old project of racial domination, where the dark-skinned boy and light-skinned storeowner acted out social roles that could be traced back to the days of the conquest. It was Raúl's skin colour as much as his poverty that left the family in no doubt that the boy was not their social equal. Hence the racial epithets Lucas Martínez shouted at his domestic when treating him roughly. Hence also the dynamics of the Martínez family parties, with the Indians working as cooks, cleaners and servants, and the gathered white family coarsely, merrily lording it over them. As a child, Raúl learned to flee from such situations of abuse. As an adult, he would rebel against them.

Epilogue

If Merced ever doubted the efficacy of her parenting approach, the day Raúl received the results of his secondary-school entrance exam she had reason to feel vindicated. Raúl had not merely passed the exam, he had won a coveted scholarship – enough money to pay for his school supplies and still have a little extra.⁷⁰ Raúl's entry into secondary school was a turning point in his life, even as outwardly many things remained the same. He still avoided home, slept in the bus depot and spent whole days immersed in comic-book adventures in Doña Guillermina's convenience store. He still sometimes played truant. But school had become something more than a distraction. It had become a source of achievement and, as his mother had always wanted, a pathway towards a profession. After secondary school Raúl went on to pre-college, then teacher-training college. He thrived in his chosen career, moving quickly through the ranks of Oaxaca's educational system. He also did what he could to help his siblings get ahead. He was able to do in real life what Merced had achieved only in her wedding picture: to blot out the shame of being *indio*. He did this not by denying his Mixtec ancestry but, on the contrary, by assuming that ancestry as a badge of pride and a source of political inspiration.

And yet Merced hardly approved of her son's life choices. She had wanted her children to live in material ease – yet Raúl poured his earnings into his politics and refused to spend money on any creature comforts. He even failed, before his mother's death, to acquire a permanent home. She had wanted her grandchildren to suffer less hardship than had her children – yet Raúl, both as father and as romantic partner, was neglectful and violent, an incarnation of the culture of male supremacy that pervaded the world of Indigenous activism no less than

⁷⁰Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 24 Feb. 2017.

other Mexican social and political spaces.⁷¹ His two sons from an earlier union, who stayed with him after the marriage ended, went to school in hand-me-down clothes and grew up in fear of their father. Their happiest days they spent with Merced, who, softened by age, treated her grandsons with tenderness and forbearance.⁷² (Only recently has Raúl begun to reflect on the harm he used to inflict on his children and lovers. It is a harm, he says, that he can never repair.)⁷³

The kind of life trajectory Merced had envisioned for her children is exemplified not by the educated Raúl but by Virginia – the sister who, in a time of family crisis, dropped out of school to look after her infant siblings. Virginia has made her living like her mother did before her, as a petty merchant. Her rise to a modest material comfort happened slowly and laboriously and found its outward expression in the family home she and her husband assembled over various decades, brick by brick, on the outskirts of Oaxaca City. Virginia's domestic priorities did not mean that she repudiated her brother's politics. She gave Raúl shelter when the police were looking for him and in 1998, with other supporters, went on hunger strike to pressure for his release from prison. For a few years she participated in protest marches and land seizures organised by Raúl's organisation, the Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca – Ricardo Flores Magón (Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – Ricardo Flores Magón, CIPO-RFM).⁷⁴ But for Virginia, family always came first. When she went to protest marches, she brought *tortas* or *tamales* to sell, as she was loath to return home without a profit.

Putting family before politics was not an option Raúl ever considered. Raúl's animating political passion, to fight against abuses of power, stemmed from a childhood in which such abuses had been the wages of his mother's domestic ambition. Family seemed to Raúl like a source of weakness. The work of militant organising, which risked death, torture and prison, could not afford any such weakness. It required a firm indifference to financial rewards. It required a recklessness with regard to one's life that no conscientious parent could easily countenance. And it pushed Raúl into an existence that was in many ways the opposite of his mother's. If Merced had accepted a life of compromise and even servility for the sake of her children, Raúl appeared to shut himself off from any demands his family might make not only on his financial resources but also on his emotional reserves.

The motifs of race and abuse, dominant in Raúl's account of his childhood, would also dominate his politics. Among the causes Raúl championed before

⁷¹Raúl used to act as a 'macho' in the strong sense of that term, which 'connotes men who expect the superior place in a vigorously defended gender hierarchy and the societies informed by such a hierarchy': Victor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein, 'Introduction: Masculinity and History in Modern Mexico', in Macías-González and Rubenstein (eds.), *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), p. 2. On the history of the term 'macho' in Mexico, see Américo Paredes, 'The United States, Mexico, and *Machismo*', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 8: 1 (1971), pp. 17–37 (first published in Spanish in 1967). On male dominance in Mexico's culture industry, see Emily Hind, *Dude Lit: Mexican Men Writing and Performing Competence, 1955–2012* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019). On male dominance in the political imagination of the Cold-War Latin American Left, see Ileana Rodríguez, *Women, Guerrillas, and Love: Understanding War in Central America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). On male-dominated gender relations in mid-twentieth century Mixteca, see Ravicz, *Organización social de los Mixtecos*, pp. 120–44.

⁷²Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 12 April 2019.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴Interview with Virginia Gregorio, Pueblo Nuevo, Oaxaca, 12 Nov. 2019.

going into exile were the elimination of fraud in local elections; the devolution of power to sub-municipal governments; the invasion of lands appropriated by local strongmen; the opening up of concessions for bus and taxi services; the freeing of political prisoners; and, not least, an end to state and para-state violence. What unites those diverse causes is their foundation in racial abuse. It was Indigenous people whose electoral voices were silenced, lands invaded by strongmen, or applications for transport concessions denied. Ideologically, Raúl came to embrace anarchist values that opposed abuses of state power with a tradition of self-government that remained strong in many of Oaxaca's Indigenous communities.

Raúl's politics were a product of their times. They responded to local contexts, and were fuelled by intellectual sources, that would no doubt reward study. Here I have argued that they were also responses to childhood trauma. They were weapons in a battle with childhood ghosts. 'Those bastards who mistreated me', he tells me, 'never imagined that they were creating an indefatigable social fighter'.⁷⁵ One morning in Lucas Martínez's merchant store, when tasked with clearing the pavement of sleeping *indios*, the boy Raúl had tried to protest. 'But how can I get them to get up?', he had sullenly asked. 'Throw some water on them or do whatever', Don Lucas had replied. 'They are your people.'⁷⁶

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Spanish abstract

Este artículo explora la niñez de un activista indígena mexicano, Raúl Javier Gatica Bautista, quien nació en 1963 en el pueblo comercial oaxaqueño de Tlaxiaco. Habiendo crecido en circunstancias de pobreza, Gatica habría de volverse un líder de los movimientos sociales que entre los años 1980 y 2000 impulsaron una reforma democrática gradual en México. El artículo busca describir lo que significaba crecer pobre e indígena en un periodo de impresionantes avances sociales y económicos (después llamado el Milagro Mexicano). Poniendo atención especial a la experiencia del abuso racial, el artículo también pregunta cómo la niñez de Gatica vino a configurar su militancia política. Mientras que otros historiadores han conectado el fenómeno del radicalismo político en el siglo XX latinoamericano con condiciones sociales particulares, o con la influencia y adaptación de ideologías globales, este artículo busca los orígenes del radicalismo de Gatica en la experiencia de una niñez racializada.

Spanish keywords: movimientos sociales; niñez; política; historia oral; indígenas

⁷⁵Phone interview with Raúl Gatica, 11 April 2021.

⁷⁶Interview with Raúl Gatica, Vancouver, 11 Nov. 2016.

Portuguese abstract

Este artigo explora a infância de um ativista indígena mexicano, Raúl Javier Gatica Bautista, que nasceu em 1963 na cidade mercantil de Tlaxiaco em Oaxaca. Tendo crescido em condições precárias, Gatica se tornaria um líder dos movimentos sociais que, entre os anos 1980 e o início dos anos 2000, empurraram o México para uma reforma democrática gradual. O artigo busca descrever como era crescer pobre e indígena em uma época (mais tarde chamada de Milagre Mexicano) de avanços sociais e econômicos impressionantes. Dando especial atenção à experiência de abuso racial, o artigo também questiona como a infância de Gatica veio a determinar sua militância política. Enquanto outros historiadores vincularam o fenômeno do radicalismo político na América Latina do século XX a condições sociais particulares, ou à influência e adaptação de ideologias globais, este artigo busca as origens do radicalismo de Gatica na experiência de uma infância racializada.

Portuguese keywords: movimentos sociais; infância; política; história oral; indígenas

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