

# A WORD ABOUT ME BEING A MEXICAN

By FX Contreras

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I'm a Mexican in the sense that I was born in Mexico. But I didn't pick the country. I just appeared there one day, and after I grew tall enough to go to school, my first-grade teacher explained that I was to be associated with millions of other strangers born near me and that we all formed a country. This arrangement came with many expectations, one of which concerned my feelings. I was to show gratitude, loyalty, and pride toward this abstraction called "Mexico," but nobody asked me if I wanted to sign up for the project in the first place.

I don't consider myself a Mexican. When people ask me, "Where are you from?" I tell them I was born in Mexico (an act that happened without my consent), but I don't tell them I'm from Mexico (a conscious sense of belonging). The grammatical subtlety is often ignored, but it means something to me.

"You don't miss the food? / the music? / the people?" my friends ask me when I go back to Monterrey.

"No," I say.

"You don't miss your family? You don't miss us?"

"Not enough."

"But your roots are here in Mexico."

"I'm not a plant. I can walk to places."

"Well, say whatever you want, but you'll never stop being a Mexican," they tell me as if a fixed cultural imperative is embedded in each human. It's an argument that reminds me of religion. When I told my mother I was an

atheist, she said, “You can’t be an atheist because the priest baptized you when you were a baby.”

In some way, they’re right. My life is informed by the years I lived in Mexico. In that sense, I’ll never stop being a Mexican. “If you hate the country so much, why don’t you stay and fight for it?” my friends ask me. This question reminds me of a propaganda campaign that started when I left Mexico. It was called “Fuga de Cerebros” (Brain Drain) and was one of the government’s efforts to explain the country’s failures, and it featured the many Mexicans who studied abroad and didn’t return. “The educated ones abandoned us, so it’s their fault,” was the campaign’s message.

I’m one of those leaky brains who studied at an American university and never returned. Was I supposed to use the magic I learned from the white gods and fix a nation that has been broken since its inception? Are you kidding me? I can’t convince my Mexican friends to quit smoking—and smoking kills.

Right after I decided never to return to Mexico, I returned to Mexico. I went to Mazatlán to visit my friend Alonso, a politician and a close friend from TEC University <sup>1</sup>. On the day of my arrival, Alonso invited me to have dinner with his extended family. We had grilled dorado fillets with lime and salt in the backyard of Alonso’s mom’s house. About ten or twelve others attended, including Alonso’s stepfather, who was not a wordsmith but felt compelled to give a toast that started with, “I’m not good with words, but this is my house, so . . .” which it wasn’t. No brick belonged to him because it was Alonso’s mom’s house. Then Alonso’s aunt and uncle told the story about traveling to Distrito Federal, Mexico’s capital.

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<sup>1</sup> Tecnológico de Monterrey (often called Tec de Monterrey or just TEC) is one of the top private universities in Mexico and Latin America.

“We didn’t spend a single peso on souvenirs, gifts, or even food. We took canned tuna and beans from home,” the uncle said, “because we only spend our money in Sinaloa” (Mazatlán is located in the state of Sinaloa.)

“We couldn’t get back to Sinaloa fast enough,” the aunt said.

They talked about their trip to the capital as if they had spent years in the Himalayas. The conversation went around the table and eventually turned to me. I told them about my Latin American literature studies at New Mexico State University and my aspirations to become a full-time writer.

“Why aren’t you studying Latin American Literature at the ITAM<sup>2</sup>?” the aunt asked.

“Because the ITAM is located in Mexico City,” I said.

“What’s wrong with the capital?” the aunt asked.

“Besides the crime? The kidnappings? The pollution? The traffic? It’s an ugly city,” I said. (This was 1998, right before these ailments spread nationwide.)

The family released a collective interjection that spelled, How dare you!—and, mind you, this happened five minutes after they had belittled the capital themselves. Then, they wanted to know my plans after graduation.

“I’m not sure where I’ll live, but there’s no way I’m ever living in Mexico,” I said. “Maybe the United States or Western Europe. Australia. I don’t know yet. I want to live in a country where I can make a good living doing what I love.”

“You can do whatever you want,” the uncle said. “But you owe it to your country to return.”

“I don’t owe my country a single thing,” I said. “I want to be a writer, and I can write from anywhere in the world.”

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<sup>2</sup> ITAM stands for Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, a prestigious private university in Mexico City known for its programs in economics, political science, law, business, and international relations. It is often compared to Tec de Monterrey but is more focused on social sciences, economics, and law, whereas TEC has a stronger reputation for engineering and technology.

“But you could teach here. Mold the minds of future generations here, in Mexico!” The uncle said.

“A teacher’s salary in Mexico would put me squarely in the lower class,” I said. “And the only thing worse than being a Mexican is being a poor Mexican.”

“We all make sacrifices. You wouldn’t be whomever you are without Mexico. Your education. Your health. Your future. All thanks to Mexico!” The aunt said.

“I owe everything to my parents, who’re fine with me leaving. I don’t see why I must justify my actions to you. I didn’t know you existed half an hour ago.”

“Admit to one thing: You owe your identity to Mexico,” the uncle said.

“I will admit to no such a thing,” I said.

“Admit to it,” the uncle said.

“Not admitting to it.”

“Admit to it,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll do it, but if you admit to loving the capital with all your heart as they do in soap operas. Say that you love Mexico City passionately,” I said.

“That’s nonsense! I don’t love the capital!”

“It’s Mexico, too, so you must love the capital. You love it. Come on. Say it.” I said.

The aunt jumped in. “You are a traitor!”

What’s so amazing about being a Mexican? Depending on whom you ask, Mexicans will say that it’s the food, the people, the sense of humor, the folklore, or the music. If you underline the suffocating corruption, they’ll tell you there’s corruption everywhere. If you mention the defeatist mindset, chronic laziness, systematic distrust, broken institutions, the patriarchy, or other defining characteristics of the culture, in that case, Mexicans will find fault in other countries to avoid fixing their own. When Mexicans can’t blame other countries, they turn into staunch regionalists, and when that

fails, they blame the government. Everyone wants a different country, but nobody wants to do the work. I don't fault them. How do you overhaul your way of thinking if your way of thinking is the problem?

I lived in Mexico for the first twenty-four years of my life, and during this time, I never experienced a moment where I thought Mexico was a great country. Still, the country I knew was much better than this one, which I no longer recognize.

Take Monterrey, for example. The last time I visited Monterrey, I was amazed by the dozens of modern high-rises that started popping up—the architectural style was more innovative than in the United States. But I knew it was a first-world mirage and a reminder that Mexicans misread the prosperity of the minority as a sign of progress. Each unit costs over a million dollars, so most floors are empty. Those buildings exist partly because that's how politicians, cartel members, and foreign criminals launder their money.

My friend Chucho Fuentes owns a house on the Sierra Madre with an excellent view of San Pedro. One time, we were hanging out on the terrace, staring at the shiny skyscrapers surrounding us. He told me, "See? Amazing, right? Monterrey is improving."

However, no one seems to mind that all that construction came at the expense of the valley's stunning feature: its mountains. While it must be nice to live in one of the mansions that compete for the Sierra Madre mountains' summit, the rest of the population must imagine what nature looked like before those public grounds became impenetrable private fortresses surrounded by high cement walls.

If you step out of those skyscrapers and cross the street, you'll enter the slums, where you'll find kilometers of windowless shacks, their walls made of stolen concrete blocks, and their roofs loosely covered with aluminum sheets. Due to the insufficiency of crossways, sidewalks, and bridges, you can't walk anywhere in Monterrey without the risk of getting

run over. Office buildings, malls, houses, and streets are built without a strategy, as if they were constructed hastily, from moment to moment, like a concrete virus that expands without concern for the future. When it rains, underpasses get flooded, and people drown. There are more food vendors, nail salons, hairdressers, and bakeries per square mile than Mexicans with a college education. The city is plagued with ads in the form of billboards, banners, and placards. And as if Monterrey didn't have enough visual pollution already, businesses add to it by hiring trucks to drive around the city, hauling giant LED screens featuring advertisements. In Monterrey, there's so much smog during the day that you can't see the mountains, and there's so much smog at night that you can't see the stars. At least as a boy, I could see the stars from my house. It was a reminder that there was light on the outside, that something untouched by Mexican incompetence existed.

If I were to design a city from scratch, the result would drastically differ from Monterrey. However, if you ask Regios<sup>3</sup> they'll tell you what my friends tell me: Monterrey is the country's most stunning city. Ask Chilangos about their city, and they'll say theirs is the most beautiful. Ask Tapatíos, and they'll say the same about Guadalajara. Poblanos love Puebla. Tampiqueños love Tampico, and so on. Some say that's because Mexicans are optimists and can find beauty everywhere. I call it self-deception. I've been to those cities. Aside from a few redeeming attractions—the occasional plaza or a half-preserved colonial church, all Mexican cities display the same urban planning, which is to say none.

I spent two years as an exchange student in Indiana (age eighteen) and Colorado (age twenty-three). Both of those times, I came back to Mexico. It was not until a few years later, when I was twenty-six, that I crossed the border, intending never to return to Mexico. When I traveled from Juarez to

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<sup>3</sup> A Regio is someone from Monterrey, the capital of the state of Nuevo León. The word is an abbreviation of "Regiomontano," a demonym for Monterrey, which is derived from the Spanish words "monte" (mountain) and "rey" (king), meaning "king's mountain" or "royal mountain".

El Paso by foot, I didn't hire a coyote to help me cross illegally. Nobody handed me a sixteen-ounce water bottle and a blessing as I ventured into a life-threatening march through the desert. I flew from Monterrey to Juarez by plane and then crossed the border on foot because flying to El Paso meant paying an extra five hundred dollars for the ticket.

I took a taxi from the airport to the Mexican-American border. After crossing, which was easy because I had a student visa, I walked to the El Paso bus station, ten minutes away. Drug addicts and prostitutes ambled through El Paso bus station's perimeter like zombies, which is not what I expected to see upon arriving in America. Imagine how much I wanted to leave Mexico: I saw addicts and prostitutes and thought, This is better!

My excuse for leaving was to study an M.A. in Latin American literature at Las Cruces, New Mexico (because the best education on Mexican culture is abroad). By the end of the first week, I decided I would never return to Mexico. I remember meeting Carlos Vargas, who is originally from Venezuela. At the time, he was the assistant tennis coach at NMSU<sup>4</sup>. He led a quiet, relaxed life. He had a big house in the desert, an excellent salary, and tons of free time. I couldn't believe it was possible to have that way of life. In Mexico, Carlos Vargas would be working from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm, chasing clients for payment, working with old, broken equipment, living in an apartment too small for his family, and having a hard time getting home due to traffic—all for less than half the money.

At New Mexico State, I got a teaching assistantship, meaning the college paid for my education and gave me a job teaching Spanish to undergrads. How did I get such an honor? You might ask. I applied for the position. I wasn't friends with an ambassador, a president, or a dean, so you can imagine how surprised I was to learn that NMSU had accepted me on my

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<sup>4</sup> New Mexico State University, a public research university in Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA.

first try<sup>5</sup>. Getting a position without needing a palanca<sup>6</sup> doesn't happen in Mexico.

Thanks to the assistantship I received at NMSU, I took my first trip to Europe that summer. In Bern, I remember sitting at a park near the clock tower and watching people play chess at 1:00 pm. Some read a book and finished their coffee before returning to work. Others took the sun while eating a sandwich or having a chat. Life seemed to drift at a pace I had never experienced before. That! I thought. I want that life.

To be clear, I do like Mexico. I like the mountains, the beaches, the jungles, the deserts, and some rivers—I'm not much of a river guy. But I don't like what Mexicans have done with the place.

But what about the food? The food is terrific. Don't you miss the food? And the people?

Yeah. The people. Right.



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<sup>5</sup> Plus, I graduated from Monterrey TEC, which is expensive—but I didn't pay for it. My father paid for it. TEC doesn't offer long-term financial help, so either your parents have the money or you go to a public university, which is like trying to graduate from prison. You enter the workplace with the same opportunities an ex-con would have.

<sup>6</sup> Palanca: To curry favor with those in power to get ahead. Mexico is not a meritocracy, so you have to befriend those in power to access benefits. It doesn't matter if you have the best grades, and apply for a scholarship to study French at La Sorbonne: you won't get it, not like that. But if your parents know the Mexican ambassador in France, or someone who knows the Mexican ambassador in France, and if your parents have something to trade, your grades don't matter. Then you have a chance. Imagine what life is like when your friendships are essential to financial success. Imagine what that says about friendship and honesty. Imagine what parties are like for the man in the suit. Imagine the gifts he gets, the offers that come to him, the women he beds! What do you do? You perform for him, just as you do if you need a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant. You perform for those men, too.