

Chapter 10 – Cate – Professor in a Man’s Field, Expatriate, Mother

Catherine Ettinger was celebrating an anniversary when I met her. She’d moved to Mexico twenty-eight years earlier, from California. We met at a coffee shop near the University where she was a professor of architecture.

The coffee shop was, like many such small restaurants in Mexico, open to the street, with the rumble of buses and the steady roar of traffic occasionally punctuated by the screaming of an espresso machine. It was popular with students who, like most Mexicans have a tremendous tolerance for what we Americans would consider noisy environments.

Kate came from California – born in Fullerton, raised in Anaheim and San Clemente. She went to school at Riverside and later Berkeley. Like a lot of students, she visited Mexico during her student years.

How did you end up in Mexico?

When I was in high school I wanted to go on an exchange program to France because I had studied French. I applied and I was accepted, but my father decided he wasn’t going to let me go that far away from home.

If I wanted to go somewhere I could go to Mexico; that was as far as he was letting me go. He felt that he had an affinity for Mexican folks himself and it was a warmer, more family place and it was better for me. So I switched and went for the summer when I was 17. Then I went back and finished high school and went to college and when I went to the University of California at Berkeley, where I studied anthropology.

I decided to stay at the international hostels because I liked the idea of meeting people from different places, and I met my husband there in 1979. He’s a physicist and was a professor here at the university. He was up looking at the laboratories with the idea of establishing labs here at the university which didn’t happen, because after the two devaluations in the early 80’s there was no way that Mexico was going to invest in a laboratory physicist. Everything turned into theoretic physics; if you wanted to do physics in Mexico it had to be theoretical.

We got married, and since he already had a full time position when we got here, the plan was for me to go back to the States and finish my degree because I had three years in anthropology but I hadn’t finished it. After a few months here I was desperate to do something. Just to go to the market was intimidating because I had to speak Spanish. I really needed to get out. I looked at the list of what degrees were available for undergraduates and there was really nothing, no sociology no anthropology and I saw architecture and I thought, well, I’ll do this for a year, and it ended up sticking with it.

That was quite a change. When you came the first time what was your immediate impression of the culture and of the country?

My first visit was 6 weeks when I was 17. I didn't get past the honeymoon phase. I loved Mexico. I went to Mexico City, which was quite a change from my small town. Taking the Metro and going to museums and going to the *Palacio* was all fascinating. Obviously it left a good impression on me because I ended up coming back.

When you moved to Morelia which was a much smaller town then, did you find that Morelia at that time was rather provincial?

It was a totally different city then from what it is now. We lived in a house near the market. Most people went to the market every day. I remember my mother-in-law criticizing me- like why would I refrigerate food instead of going every day to get fresh food. Things like that. You couldn't get broccoli, you couldn't get mushrooms, you couldn't get parmesan cheese and I like to cook. I had all my vegetarian cookbooks and then to get here and no ingredients. There was one small supermarket but we never went to it, it was far away. People still took siestas. Everything closed from 2 to 4. That's just the way it was. There were things that were hard to adapt to, but in general I liked it.

I think that we all remember the past with a certain nostalgic look. In many ways I miss how all the traditional aspects of daily life in Mexico have really disappeared. The supermarkets came and they began to be open all day. At first you're happy because it's so convenient, and now if you have to buy something at night you can. If you have to go to the bank on your lunch hour, you can. But in the end you lose out because now nobody rests for 2 hours in the middle of the day.

I heard something like that earlier today from someone else I was talking to. The change of culture has got some plusses and minuses.

Exactly.

Overall in your opinion, for your life, do you feel the change of the culture is a positive or a negative, or can you even say?

I think it would be really hard to say. In terms of culture, I think I'd probably judge it negatively. I think there's been a lot of loss of a life that – well it's hard to speak because I am speaking from my own point of view- Mexicans do spend an awful lot of time, Morelia especially, any business, in a café. People sit and talk. It's too accelerated and I don't do that. So maybe from my perspective I think that, like the pace has picked up a little too much and consumerism is also a big thing here. Now we have all our attention on certain brands of clothes and purses and those kinds of values that I don't think were as present.

For seven years I worked coordinating housing stays for students from the state of California who came to Morelia. That experience gave me a real insight into a lot of the

upper middle class families in a certain area of the city who received the students. The students will tell you everything about what they eat, what they do, how they spend their time and it was a really nice window into society. Of course there were some families who were dysfunctional, but in general I just had a really good impression of the way everyone sort of knew their role and the importance of family.

Sunday the family always getting together and parents maintain close relationships with their children, even after they are married. A lot of children would wind up buying a house or renting a house near their parents and there was a lot of continuity and support. I think a lot of that still persists. You see a lot of working women whose mothers help them out by taking care of kids, or when they get off work at 3 they know they can go eat lunch with their parents.

That's great. You mentioned working women. My impression is that is something that has changed tremendously in the last 20 years. Is it fair to say that most Mexican women do work outside the home now?

I don't know about the statistics but it's very, very common across all the different social classes. Some of the upper class women don't work because they don't need to or because they spend their time keeping themselves in shape and beautiful, and some of the lower class women don't work because their husbands don't let them or they are more traditional. I think that across the board there are more women that are working.

You mentioned the lower economic classes are more likely to hold on to the older values, maybe not the most positive values.

It's hard for people in the United States to imagine being close to your family or a 20 year old who lives at home as being positive. It's just amazing. I felt I was very lucky. Of course I'm very Mexicanized and I realize that to a Mexican, there are still a lot of ways that I appear very Anglo. I feel lucky that my oldest son, who studied here at the University stayed at home til he was 22.

I felt very fortunate because I loved having him at home and we got along great. I got along with his girlfriend too; we do stuff together. He'll call up and say, "Mom and Dad, my girlfriend and I are going to the movies, do you want to go with us?" It turned into a really nice stage of his life. Sometimes he was never at home but he was past that horrible adolescence when they really don't want to see you. Now he's in Chile and he's going to start a Masters at University of Santa Barbara in the fall.

I was lucky but when I tell one of my friends from the States, they are aghast. They say, "Surely he doesn't live at home anymore," like it was a bad thing.

That's something I would love to explore because to me, what I think it is important for my readers to know, is to understand that part of the culture. We've got this tremendous need for independence. Would it be correct to say that in Mexico there's more of an inter-dependence?

I think it would and I think there's no problem here with value judgments. They're different cultures. One culture values independence and the other culture values family. You can hear Mexicans judging people from the United States, saying things like, they don't care about their kids, and they kick them out when they're 18 as if it were inconceivable.

They're just different values and when you understand the culture you don't need to judge it. That's just the way it is. It definitely has its upside and maybe this isn't really relevant. There's so much literature, psychological literature, self help literature that is coming to Mexico, mostly translated books. The whole idea of adolescence that didn't really exist here.

Nobody would say things like teenagers are horrible or even the word adolescence. Now people are beginning to create this myth about teenagers being difficult or adolescence being a difficult period. It's so different here. In general it's not so difficult here. Kids are part of a family and there isn't the kind of segregation that you see in the United States. Most social activities in the United States are segregated; there are very few social activities that will include family members of all ages.

True.

It's really true. I would notice it with my kids. When I would go to the States with my kids when they were small, even in restaurants, in a nice restaurant, you don't see people with little kids. People would look at you like, 'shut them up or get them out of here'. I remember really clearly, once when I had an American student with me and we were at a restaurant and the kids were sort of running around and he said, 'Aren't you going to make them sit down? I said, "No, why? They're kids." He said, "Aren't the people going to get mad?" I said, "No, people know kids are kids. They run around." Of course there was no problem. I think the waiter gave them a sucker or something. It shocked me the first time.

Once I didn't go back for 5 years because of not having money and the devaluation, et cetera. Which is a long time to not really speak your language. I remember going back and feeling this hostility for little kids. Here a little kid goes into a store or wants to order, they'll kneel down and ask them what they want, or whatever and pay special attention to them. I remember my son, being so proud; five years old and he was going to buy something by himself with a dollar at some Quick Mart or something. I remember the person in the United States just took his money, rang up the cash register indifferently and gave him his change as if he were anyone.

It surprised me because I knew in Mexico they never would have done that. Somebody would say, 'oh what a cute little boy, how sweet, what a darling smile' or some kind of reaction. I wonder a lot how much those attitudes make that period of transition into adulthood more difficult when you separate the kids. Here, at weddings you'll see kids of every single size. Here they dance when they're 12 they dance when they're 15 and their

parents are around, and little kids are around. It's all a somewhat more natural flow. Being a teenager isn't satanized. I had an easy time and I really noticed my family in the states, they had a much more difficult time- I'm one of eight so I have a lot of nieces and nephews- they all had a much more difficult time in their teenage years. I always wondered how much of it had to do with people expecting kids to be difficult at that age. We don't expect it, and culturally it's not expected, it doesn't happen as much.

That's a great observation. One thing that I've noticed is that in general, like where we live, it's on the border and Hispanic culture, kids are pretty much accepted as part of everything, but I find that the kids in Mexico are better behaved than the ones on the north side of the border.

I've noticed exactly that same thing. I've noticed it from the time my kids were small. Kids are kids, but there's such an emphasis still here on courtesy and politeness and it's just something that will always open doors for you. I really believe in it. I remember once we were with my brother-in-law and my sister in San Diego in a pizzeria and one of my boys said, Sir, may I please have- something- I don't remember what it was, but that he said 'Sir, may I please have,' and my sister said "Oh, I love going out with you, your kids are so polite," and here if you don't say 'please' it's very rude. Part of it is the courtesy. I don't know but I have noticed it.

How about old people? Parents and grandparents. Is it true that now there are more nursing homes for people with disabilities? The family is not taking care of them forever like they used to?

I don't know what's happening in Mexico City which is a big city, but this is a mid-sized city and I don't really see that tendency. We had a terrible problem with my mother-in-law who fell. She's had a lot of psychiatric problems and she's had a lot of physical problems and at one point my sister-in-law was going crazy. I don't even want to describe the details but we looked for options and there really aren't any. No good options even if you're willing to pay- there aren't options. I think most people keep their parents at home. A lot of people, I know I'm speaking more of the upper and middle classes, I really can't speak for other groups. A lot of people will actually build an extra little apartment on their house or on their lot so when their parents are older they can live next to them but not in the house- that kind of thing is common. Most people take their parents back into their houses when the time comes.

Even when they have Alzheimer's?

Oh yeah. One of the advantages here too, and this goes for a working woman if you're a professional and in the case of older people is you always have the option of hiring someone to help.

My mother-in-law's house; my husband and his brother pay for her care, so there is a full time person to care for her and someone go 2 or 3 times a week to exercise her. The two

brothers pay for it because the sister had her at her house and I think that takes a lot of the stress off the family. You can still afford that kind of help.

Could you compare your life with that of a woman in a similar position in the United States?

Certainly. I visited a friend in California who is a professor. After I stayed at her house for 3 days I just realized that even though in dollars I earn less, there are a lot of things that make living here better in many ways – from a humanist perspective.

Perhaps we didn't have the same access to things, or my children didn't have the same quality of education. They couldn't always go to these great museums or maybe there were a lot of things that they didn't have access to. I just felt that our daily quality of life was a thousand times better.

My friend in California had to get up at five AM, got off work at five PM to pick up her kids from day care, go to the market, come home and cook something, throw clothes in the washer at ten at night. While she was correcting papers. Whew! I get tired just thinking about it.

I just thought how I usually go to work at seven-thirty in the morning or else I do exercise and go to work at nine. At three in the afternoon, I come home and the table is set, the food is hot and the house is clean.

I'm not saying I don't stress out about a lot of other things but it certainly makes you more productive because then in the afternoon I can correct papers or write or be my daughters taxi driver. It's defiantly different.

It's a quality of life issue. The difference between living in Mexico and living in the United States for this economic class. If you had a choice to exchange your life here for a similar life over there with the same things, would you stay here?

That's a really hard question. I think many of the advantages of being here would win out. I wouldn't trade raising my kids here for raising them in the United States. I have three kids – two boys and a girl. I've always worked. When the boys were little I worked half-time. When my daughter was born I had a really good housekeeper. I remember the day after I came home with her from the hospital; my housekeeper walked in and said, 'Are you going to bathe her or am I?'

She was so sure of herself and it was really easy to go to work and know she was at home and she was clean and she was taken care of. In general that's true of the whole society, not just my economic level. The kids had a good education at a bi-lingual school with three hours of English and three hours of Spanish. They had good elementary school, junior high, and a good high school so there were a lot of advantages. I wouldn't trade

that but sometimes now I think I might like to go back. Sometimes you get tired of the daily stupid things like traffic, the lack of city planning or sometimes you just want to go live in a place where everything looks beautiful on the outside even if it really is all the same in the inside.

Of course it's not always that way. I have a sister who lives in a really pretty part of Riverside. My mother lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Take a picture of that main street and you can say any place in Mexico is more beautiful than the United States. Next year I'll be on sabbatical and I'm planning to spend a quarter at the University of Washington, which I'm really looking forward to going back to. I've never gone back to live, and when I do go back sometimes I do feel really out of sync.

I feel out of sync after only a few weeks here. When I lived here in Puerto Escondido, in Oaxaca, when I would go back it was very difficult. I couldn't explain it.

Yes, I know that feeling. People look at you and expect you to ... they don't see that you're not like them. I remember once I don't know how long I'd been gone but I went to mail a letter and I didn't know how much a stamp cost. I went in and it was all machines and I didn't know how to work the machines and I went to ask someone how much a stamp costs. They looked at me like, 'How can you not know what a stamp costs? You speak English'.

Last year I went up for an academic conference and I stayed at my brother's and I felt really strange. It's very strange to be a foreigner in your own country, and the people in your country don't realize it. They don't have a clue that you're feeling weird or you don't know how to act or even when you say hi to people and they're so casual. You're so used to this courtesy, and you just feel awkward.

What I've heard from other Mexicans is that the American culture is somehow colder. That there's more distance between us and here it may be superficial but there's a courtesy, there is a warmth and what seems to be a genuine interest in other people. Would you agree with that?

I don't know. I've tried to sort of excuse Americans in a sense that there are different codes. If you're used to that code where people don't turn and say hello or goodbye. Like this woman who worked at my architecture school. Of course she couldn't walk out without saying good-bye to me. Where if I was in the States and I was in a Starbucks and somebody I knew was there, if they walk out, if they don't turn around there is no reason for me to take offense or say anything.

One thing Americans notice about Mexico is that it is noisier. Some call this livelier and some just say that there is more noise. Yet, most Mexicans don't seem to notice. Do you feel these are valid statements?

I think Mexico is noisier and there is a greater tolerance for noise. That is one difficulty I never really got over; I never developed a tolerance for noise. There isn't much respect for other people when they make noise, like if I'm on the beach and I have a radio- I'll just turn it up and everyone will have to listen to it. I think that is changing a little.

I remember back in the 60's and even now, if you're in a restaurant and even if you're the only one there, they will turn the radio up because it's muy triste if there is no music.

Live music has to be loud, and the good bars have live music. And a place without music is considered *muy triste* (very sad).

Do you believe that today there are more teenage delinquency problems because of the dissolution of the family?

There probably are. In this city there's a lot of teenage drinking. That's the most serious problem. There are a lot of car accidents. A lot of teenage deaths are mostly due to drinking. The kind of thing that is frustrating is that the discothèques or whatever don't check ID's and they will give liquor to any teenager that walks in. I've been really shocked. My daughter is fifteen now, and when she was thirteen and fourteen she started to go to all the *quinceaneras* [important coming-of-age parties when a girl turns fifteen] and I remember when I took her to the second one I said, well there won't be alcohol there. The parent's are going to be there with a bunch of people, it's a fifteen year-old's party. She turned to me and said, "*Mom, you have no idea.*" After the first time her older brother would go and check out the scene for me and tell me to pick her up at midnight or it's not that bad. Now she's pretty careful about that stuff.

There's more drinking than drugs?

Yes, more drinking than drugs. There are drugs but there is a lot of drinking.

Is that a peer thing, is it that drugs are looked down upon or drinking is elevated?

I think yes, drugs are looked down upon and drinking is elevated. My boys are out of school but I remember I asked them, do you remember being offered drugs or what. He said there are drugs there, maybe five or ten kids who do them. Everyone knows who they are but they don't bother you, and you don't bother them. My 2 boys say they were never offered or pressured with drugs. As far as drinking goes they were offered but neither of them do it.

We focused a lot on the family and you've given me a more comprehensive view of the family than I've gotten from some of the other people. I thank you very much, it's great. What about the role of women in the workplace? It seems from what I've heard that women have more opportunities for advancement in the workplace than they used to of course, but is there still a glass ceiling?

I wonder myself. I've always felt like I'm a really lucky person. When I finished

architecture everyone told me it's impossible for a woman to go in to a construction site and run it, and I've built several houses. I've worked on the restoration of the aqueduct here in Morelia. I never really had problems.

You have to be careful how you dress because you know – construction workers all over the world- but I always felt safe. The social classes being so different like for a construction worker- he has to respect a woman. He might beat his wife, but I never had any problem. I remember once a foreman said, '*you do know how to get mad*', and I said, '*yes I have to or they'll walk all over me*'.

At the university you could say that there are equal opportunities for advancement, but at the same time I'm head of the graduate division in my school, and on the counsel and I look around and it's almost all men. I've looked at the statistics and full professors it must be still 75% men.

Is there really a brain drain in Mexico – where the best and the brightest from Mexico are going abroad to live and work?

That's a fact. Last week when there were some professors here from the University of Washington we were talking about it and he asked, what do you do with your own kids, do you tell them? They should stay here and contribute, or do you let them go?

My oldest son said he wants to come back, and he said he wants to contribute to the country. He wants to study computer science and he felt that he can come back and contribute. You're aware of the difference and I remember a friend saying he had been where a Mexican student was in England and he was getting his doctorate and they offered him nothing. In Mexico and in Germany they offered him a full professorship or associate professorship with a good starting salary.

Or if you graduate and come back here you have to knock on doors and can't get a job. It's inevitable. It's sad because the federal government- the National Council of Science and Technology- invests an enormous amount of money in graduate degrees. They don't invest in after-graduate degrees; usually it's related to priorities.

They pay full tuition, a thousand dollars a month in medical insurance for medical insurance for Mexican students to get graduate degrees abroad. They're supposed to come back and work for the same number of years but a lot of times they don't. Even my son's girlfriend, she's in fine arts major. She just came back from a stay in Massachusetts where her brother's at MIT or Harvard. She said, '*all I know is I have to get out of here, there are no opportunities here for me. If I don't go to a big city like New York I'll never advance.*' That's just the way it works I guess. If you don't go to a university that has well equipped state of the art laboratories you can't really advance in your field.

Mexico has been at the forefront of advancement like in medical things. Birth control was invented here I believe, and the first injection.

Some of the first transplants. Color TV, and you know what else they just invented? Transparent concrete. It's an amazing discovery that is definitely going to revolutionize architecture. It's not completely transparent, but it's translucent. Amazing.

It would be.

There are some really good scientists here.

They must be very good. A Mexican businessman once told me that to be a successful Mexican businessman you have to be twice as good as a successful American businessman because you have so many challenges to overcome.

You don't know what the inflations going to be, you don't know what the government is going to do .You don't know how the city is going to grow- where you want to invest.

Do Mexican scientists have to be twice as good?

I don't know, but it is harder. You don't have the same access to publications; you don't have the same access to information. Even in my work in the history of architecture and preservation; just imagining being able to go to a University library in the United States is amazing. The library here is not anything you would brag about. Any American University has a better library, and their library loan system is really better, too.

There's a public library here, if you get a chance you should go to it. It's just a few blocks west from the cathedral; you'll see the façade of a church. It was a Jesuit church. Inside is this incredible library with old books going all the way up, some from the Colonial period.

It seems that Mexicans in general really appreciate and revere in education. In terms of funding education, it's not there. Is that different than in the US?

The United States have it in the statistics. I've seen that they measure it by the percentage of the Gross National Product and it's been like six percent. Here, in Mexico, it's gotten up to about five percent, until there were the devaluations. The debt payments have made the government get it back to like 2.8% [EDITOR – I WAS UNSURE HOW TO EXPRESS THESE NUMBERS – SPELLED OUT OR NUMERICALLY. WITH 2.8 IT DID NOT LOOK RIGHT SPELLED OUT] or maybe three percent now. In the United States is between six and eight percent.

Is there anything you'd like to say to someone who may read this book to express why you prefer to be here or overcome any misconceptions? When you met people from the Universities in the United States who have come here to visit, I assume there may be some misconceptions they commonly have, so if you want to say anything to sort of clear that up for the readers?

The biggest misconception of Mexico is that it is urban, not rural. I think most people think of Mexico and ask, aren't they going to get sunburned? Are you going to live on a ranch?

I think the warmth of the people is probably one of the big pluses and it's one of the things when I go to academic meetings I notice how cold people can be and how competitive. Not everyone, but I remember we went to this conference in Paris and it was kind of a select meeting, I think they were having eight groups of people and we got accepted.

When we were there, there was this Chilean woman who afterwards said she'd like to go have a drink with us. She was a really nice older woman, author of several books. She said she never felt at home much of anywhere because she was really from a German family and she never felt comfortable, having a great difficulty relating to women academics. She felt that they were really absorbed by their careers and that they'd really lost the feminine human side, but she really liked talking to us because she felt that we seemed more balanced.

In a University here if your kid has a school performance and you cancel class, everyone considers that the right thing to do. How could you think class is more important than your kid? I don't think it works that way everywhere.

No, certainly not in the United States.

It seems to me that it is a lot easier to be a working mother here. First we usually have relatives very close by. If your kid is sick and you have to go to work there's a grandmother or an aunt that will pitch in. You can usually have help at home, even if not every day, at least two or three times a week. There's just a different attitude.

Motherhood is sacred. Working in the States there doesn't seem to be accommodations for family. I felt really lucky because we have a good quality of life.

There is a different concept of leisure, of leisure time. On a weekend you'll invite people for lunch at three and they'll stay until maybe ten at night.

It is less structured. For instance dinner is not from six to eight exactly. I remember seeing that on invitations in the States where there is an end to the evening, and you have to go home at that time. I notice a lot of differences with my husband. If he has to make a choice between saving money and taking a good family vacation, he will always take the vacation.

The longer I'm here my concept has changed too. Upper-middle class, all the kids go to Europe at some point. It's important for your kids to see other places. Most of the time they come back. If you look at people in the States they don't want to spend it. They don't want to see museums, have fun, and enjoy their time.

I look around me and I see the secretaries here at work have cars, that twenty years ago they wouldn't have had. They have a better standard of living than there was years ago. People don't trust stocks and investments. It's land that will always be there.

There are many missionaries in Mexico. What is your opinion of them?

Well, they take the kid, and yeah, they feed them, but they take them out of the family home and isolate them.

Are there many foreigners living in Morelia?

There was a big American colony here once, but not now. There are students who come here to study Spanish for a few years and leave. There are a lot of newcomers that like to complain; criticize Mexico or Mexicans.

If you like the unexpected, if you're a person who is able to adapt to change quickly, you have to be able to let go of whatever your future-oriented American upbringing left you and just go with the flow. If you can't do that, this is not the place for you. There are groups that try to get people to donate like \$20 a month to help a kid. You have to integrate yourself into the community, the school activities, and the church activities.

There are women who bitch about their husbands in public, in front of other men, well, you don't do that here. They think I'm American too, it's ok, but I am embarrassed for them. Perspectives are really different.

Thank you very much, Cate.

Al contrario (on the contrary), thank you.

END OF CHAPTER