

LO QUE LA MEMORIA RECUERDA: A Journey in Sewing

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When my niece was six-years-old, they demanded I sew dresses and skirts for them. However, at the time, I didn't sew. Randomly, I did own a sewing machine. My aunt, who is not my aunt but my mother's childhood friend, cleans houses for a living. The women she has worked for often give her the things they no longer want or need. When she would come home, my mom and I rummaged through the bags for things we wanted to keep for ourselves. One day, my aunt said, "me dieron una máquina de coser, ¿lo querés?" I took the sewing machine in. She thought that because I had learned to weave that the sewing machine would somehow help me in my weaving journey. I don't know why I accepted the sewing machine, especially since I had never sewn or thought about sewing. But I took the machine in, and it sat in my closet for years until that moment when my niece said I should make them clothes.

"But your grandma (her maternal grandmother, my brother's mother-in-law) sews. Ask her?" I told my niece.

"No," they demanded. "You make me skirts." They did not know I had a sewing machine. They just insisted it should be I who makes them clothes.

I decided to oblige my niece. I watched every YouTube video I could to learn how to sew. I went to a big box craft store and bought some sequined fabric, which is not the best fabric for beginners, and made my first skirts

for the three nieces that wanted skirts. I made my nieces stand still in my mother's kitchen. I measured their waist with a measuring tape I bought. I measured from their waist to above their knee. I made sure to write all the measurements down alongside their name so that I got it right. My mom sat at the kitchen table, stared, and eventually said, "me recuerda a mi mamá."

I did not learn to sew from my mother. She does not know how to sew. I did not learn from my aunts. My maternal aunts live in Guatemala. I do not have aunts from my father's side because he has no sisters. I did not learn to sew from any of my abuelas. My mother's mom lived in Guatemala. And my father's mom barely acknowledged my existence. But this is not about my father's side of the family. This is about the legacy of women in my family and how sewing has brought us together, even if time kept us apart.

My sewing journey opened up stories from my mother, stories about her mother I had not heard before, and even stories about herself and her work experiences at a young age that I had not heard either. In this journey of sewing I learned that my mother worked at a sweatshop when she was maybe twelve, maybe thirteen-years-old. She worked for a family who owned a garment factory, but this family had a side garment business, which she now realizes was an illegal business, in their home. In this side home business, only children worked. I call it a sweatshop. My mother, however, does not consider it a sweatshop. After all, she says, "Nos trataban bien. Los jefes hasta nos dejaban comer en la misma mesa con ellos." I try to explain to her that just because she was able to eat at the same table as the owners of the company, working in a garment business at age twelve or thirteen was still not a good thing. Her response, "en otros lugares los niños les tocaba más duro." I get it. Sometimes crumbs make you think owners of companies are good people. Her position at this garment business was

to run the mechanical weaving machines, making sure that the threads didn't break and that the machines wove smoothly. Many of her family worked at this garment factory—either in the factory itself or at the side home business. Each family member did something different: working the weaving machines or sewing.

My mother migrated from Guatemala to Chicago in 1968. She overstayed her VISA, and for seven years she was undocumented. She met my father in 1974 while they both worked at a factory in Chicago, and in 1976 when I was born, she was able to get her green card through me. She didn't become a U.S. citizen until 2016. A contentious presidential campaign forced her to become a U.S. citizen.

Like many immigrants, my mother came to the US with the sole purpose to work and help her family back in Guatemala. She has been working since the age of eight. When she was eight, during her school breaks, she, along with other children, were taken to a coffee plantation to pick coffee. She doesn't acknowledge this as work, arguing that it was during breaks from school and it was fun. I remind her that this is an abuse of child labor. But she reminds me that it was an opportunity they needed. When my mother was twelve or thirteen and worked at the garment factory, she was no longer in school. She could not afford to go to school. She worked to help out, and she has been working ever since.

My grandmother sewed for a living. When my mother was young, her aunt owned a little sewing studio that catered to women de dinero in Guatemala. "En ese tiempo no habían departamentos de ropa. Las mujeres llegaban y hacían sus pedidos," my mother recalls. My grandmother would make the dresses for the rich women. With the leftover fabric, she would make her own kids dresses.

For the garment factory, my grandmother would pick up the cut fabric, take it home, and sew the garments at home at her sewing machine. When my mom hears my sewing machine, an inexpensive, but computerized machine, she reminds me that her mother sewed on a manual, treadle machine. While I push my pedal so the machine sews automatically, much like pushing a pedal down in a car, my grandmother had to constantly push the pedal to make the needle move, much like riding a bike: pedal to move.

When my mother's aunt migrated to Chicago, her sewing studio ceased to exist. But my grandmother always sewed. If someone needed a dress, she sewed it.

In March of 2020, when face mask mandates went into effect but were difficult to find, I made over 150 masks for family and friends. Again, I turned to YouTube and just sewed. I had some fabric and some elastic. Making one after another was peaceful. The repetition of each step allowed me to just stop thinking about the world and focus on the sewing and construction steps. I thought, I could do this and be happy. My hands carefully guiding the fabric through the machine, keeping a straight line. Something about the act felt right. It felt as if I had done it my whole life. I told my mom this, and she said, "Lo llevas en la sangre. Mi mamá cosía. [Mi hermana] cose. Yo soy la única que no cose."

I made the masks and put out a call on social media to my family and friends, "anyone need a mask or two, first come basis, come pick up." And they did. They were not perfect. But they did the job in those early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While I made masks for my community, I do not have a desire to sew garments for anyone but for myself and for my nibblings.¹ I do not have a

desire to dress others, to measure their bodies, to please their aesthetic. There is something comforting in having the option to say that I only sew for myself. I don't know if I am my ancestor's wildest dreams. But I'd like to believe that I might be my grandmother's. I might not have her talent. But I have the calling for the art of sewing. And all the sewing I do is during my free time. I do it for myself, in my room, with my fabric, with my sewing machine, at my pace. Sometimes when I go into a fabric store, like a place like Mood in New York City, I walk through the aisles and I think about how I get to pick what I want for me. What would have my grandmother picked for herself?

My grandmother died in 2009 from a pulmonary disease. She did not smoke, but as my mom recalls, until the day she died, my grandmother cooked over a wooden stove. I have very vague memories of my grandmother. We didn't visit Guatemala often. Work and school schedules along with the price for five tickets just didn't allow us to go as often as I am sure my mother would have preferred. I have a vague memory of going when I was maybe twelve and then again at sixteen. My memories with my grandmother involve images of her sitting in her home. Long braid, apron, smiling. We were strangers, really. Age getting in the way of getting to know one another. I do not recall seeing a sewing room or a sewing machine. But I also wasn't looking for one. Instead, I remember eating the helados de mora she would make to sell. I remember my mother's uncle's, her father figure, molino de maíz. I don't recall interactions. Phone calls were few. Back then, in the 1980s and early 1990s, there wasn't easy communication like Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp affords today. My grandmother didn't have a phone and phone calls were expensive. Phone calls were planned affairs, my mother calling one of my grandmother's neighbors so that they could inform my grandmother the specific time and date my

mother would call for her. The phone reception was bad with static and the voices sounding far. In order to talk and be heard, we had to yell into the phone, landlines back then. When my mom called my grandmother, we, the kids, had our obligatory turn. These were quick from what I can remember,

“Hola, abuelita Concha.” She would ask us how we were doing, and we said, “bien,” and interaction over.

My aunts and I have more of a relationship today. On my more recent visits to Guatemala, alone, without my parents, I have had more interaction with them. And with technology, I could form a stronger relationship. But they are still strangers, and over the phone or FaceTime, it’s not as easy to form the aunt-niece bond geography has fractured. However, they often send me messages of how proud they are of me, and most recently, how proud they are of my sewing journey.

My relationship to the women in my family is metaphor and memory. The body somehow knows and connects us. And every time I sew, I think of the grandmother I barely knew. I purposely only sew for myself and my niblings. I purposely do not sew for anyone else. For now, I revel in that privilege. I don’t need to measure gente de dinero and make them clothes while using the scraps to clothe my family. For the grandmother I never really knew, for the aunts I am just getting to know, and for my mom who has worked hard her entire life, I choose to sew for myself. Their hard work has allowed me that choice.

Notes

¹ Niblings is a gender-neutral term used to refer to a child of one’s sibling as a replacement for “niece” or “nephew”, according to Merriam-Webster.