

CHAPTER 7



Before It Ends

AGING, GENDER, AND MIGRATION IN A TRANSNATIONAL MEXICAN COMMUNITY

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The song “Un poco más,” written by Mexican composer Álvaro Carrillo in the first half of the twentieth century, is still very popular in Mexico. When I started fieldwork in Pueblo Nuevo, in rural Mexico, in the mid-1990s, many people knew its lyrics by heart. The romantic song expresses the quest for a bit more time before love ends. I was astonished when almost twenty years later, in 2013, “Un poco más” was again mentioned during interviews with several generations of women in Pueblo Nuevo. Between 1995 and 2013, Pueblo Nuevo had changed substantially. In 1995, the vast majority of villagers would migrate only within Mexico. By the turn of the century, many migrated to the United States on a temporary basis. With the transnationalization of village life, new forms of consumption emerged, most visibly in impressive new houses built with the money the migrants remitted. Despite these changes, when in 2013 I asked women of different ages what they considered a good life to be, the women did not mention material wealth or conspicuous consumption. Instead, they hoped for stability, that things would stay as they are, just a little bit longer, just *un poco más*. The women were well aware of the fragility of their well-being. Endings pervaded their lives. They had suffered from and witnessed accidents, separations, poverty, sickness, death, and injustice. From these lived experiences, their own and others’, they concluded that well-being was more than to have longings and to overcome losses. To be well, they told me, one had to appreciate the very moment that one was living. Soon it could be over. The women’s views on well-being and good life surprised me. Seeing new cars, houses, washing machines, and television sets all over the village, I had expected more materialistic, aspirational, and future-oriented answers. From previous interactions, I knew that the women did emulate and desire the new styles and objects of transnational consumerism, hoping to get ahead, *adelantarse*. Still, this was not what they answered when I asked them about the good life. In this chapter, I trace the women’s present-focused conception of well-being and relate it to other

temporal categories of “the good life.” I ask how their experiences and imaginings of endings frame their wish to prolong the present.

Well-being is a rather new theme in anthropology (Appadurai 2013, 293; Jiménez 2008a; Lambek 2008). The concept and related categories like happiness or “the good life” are key dimensions in political philosophy, development studies, and economics. In anthropology, until 2008, well-being had not been “the focus of explicit attention” (Jiménez 2008b, 2). With the publication that year of the seminal volume *Culture and Well-Being* (edited by Alberto Corsín Jiménez) this has changed, and an anthropology of well-being has been taking shape.

Not surprisingly, anthropology’s take on the subject is ethnographic and comparative, highlighting the relativity of the concepts depending on the cultural, political, and social contexts of its usages. Contrary to economic approaches to well-being that stress and measure mainly material aspects, anthropologists underscore the importance of aspirations: “To understand the good life, wherever it may be found, we must take seriously not only material conditions but also people’s desires, aspirations, and imaginations—the hopes, fears, and other subjective factors that drive their engagement with the world” (Fischer 2014, 5). Future making through aspirations is thus a central lens through which many anthropological studies try to understand people’s sense of a good life. In comparative research on how German middle-class shoppers and Guatemalan coffee and broccoli farmers pursue happiness, Edward F. Fischer (2014, 2) thus observes: “Perhaps the good life is not a state to be obtained but an ongoing aspiration for something better that gives meaning to life’s pursuits.” According to Fischer, this striving for the good life can be analytically separated into two domains: a core, of adequate material resources, physical health and safety, and family and social relations, and the qualitative elements of well-being, which Fischer labels as more “subjective domains”: aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness, commitment to a larger purpose (Fischer 2014, 5, 207–10).

While there is also work on the political dimensions of well-being (Appadurai 2013; see the contributions in Jiménez 2008a), most anthropological studies focus on Fischer’s “subjective” dimensions. Michael Jackson (2011, xii) grounds his analysis of well-being in his observation that aspirations are the result of a sense that something is missing, leading to the conclusion that “there is more to life than what exists for us in the here and now.” This longing beyond the present can be nostalgic and past-oriented: “At times we imagine that the lost object was once in our possession—a loving family, an organic community, an Edenic homeland, a perfect relationship” (xii). It can also be directed at the future: “At times we imagine that what we need lies ahead, promised or owed but as yet undelivered, unrevealed, or unpaid, not yet born” (xii).

While future making and nostalgic longing are thus common in the anthropology of the good life and well-being, an appreciation of the present is relatively rare in such studies. An exception is Michael Lambek’s (2008) essay on well-being. There, Lambek describes a friend of his in Mayotte, northwest of Madagascar, living a content life as a carpenter and a performer and teacher of Sufi music. When

the friend has to give up independent carpentry and work as a wage laborer with very little time left for his music, “his well-being radically decline[s]” (130). Well-being, Lambek argues (128), is thus an art of living, making the best of things in the face of considerable impediments.

In what follows, I scrutinize this art of living in the very present, also relating it to nostalgic longings and future aspirations. Jackson (2011, xi) has observed that “well-being is, therefore, one thing for the young, another for the old, and varies from place to place, person to person.” To address some of the variations of well-being, I compare the lives and views on well-being of women from three different generations. I use the term *generation* (Alber, Van der Geest, and Whyte 2008) here as a genealogical classification, comparing a daughter, a mother, and a grandmother: Adriana, who in 2013 was in her twenties; her mother, Alma, then in her forties; and Alma’s mother, Regina, in her sixties.¹ I suggest that for an understanding of future aspirations, nostalgic longing for the past, and a content sentiment of the present, it is important to situate these “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977) in the wider contexts of time, generations, and the (female) life course. The lives of women of different generations are complexly entangled, rendering it difficult to focus only on later life and older women. The interconnections become especially visible when looking at marriage and migration (Montes de Oca Zavala, Molina Roldán, and Avalos Pérez 2008, 220–235). Thus, to understand aspirations in later life, I also scrutinize how younger women frame well-being, asking how different generations of women inform and reflect on each other.

A TRANSNATIONAL MEXICAN PEASANTRY

Located about three hours away from Mexico City in the valley of Solís in the Estado de México, Pueblo Nuevo is in many ways typical for rural Mexican communities shaped by national and international migration. In about eighty years, the livelihoods of villagers have changed from subsistence-oriented land cultivation of maize and beans into a mixed economy of remittances and agriculture. National and transnational migration has framed and formed the lives of all families in Pueblo Nuevo. In 2013, roughly half of all adult men (aged fifteen years and older) had migrated to U.S. destinations. Most of them invested in the building of remittance houses in the *estilo del norteño*, or North American style (Lopez 2015, 51). Once a “traditionally looking” Mexican village of one-story houses made from adobe bricks, Pueblo Nuevo has changed considerably in appearance since the building of remittance houses. While in the 1990s there was still a lot of space between houses, today most available spots for building a house have been taken. A comparison of census data from 1997 and 2013 shows that the number of North American-style remittance houses has increased substantially (Pauli and Bedorf 2016, 2018). In 1997, 27 percent of the houses (or 44 out of 163) were built in North American style with money from U.S. migration. Sixteen years later, there were 128 new houses permanently inhabited and another 49 new remittance houses not permanently inhabited. Like many Mexican communities

experiencing substantial transnational migration, these empty houses, or *casas vacías* (Lattanzi Shutika 2011, 68–90; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017), were most often meant as retirement homes for their absent owners. In addition to these two types of finished remittance houses, there were many more unfinished remittance houses in all stages of construction.

Gender frames the migration dynamics in Pueblo Nuevo. As in other Mexican regions, many more men than women from Pueblo Nuevo migrate internationally (Boehm 2016; Haenn 2020). None of the women whose lives and hopes I am discussing here has ever migrated to the United States. Both Alma and Regina migrated for a brief few years to Mexico City; Adriana never left the valley of Solís. Nevertheless, their lives were formed and framed by transnational migration. They had seen their husbands, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters leave and return. To classify their role in the migration process, one could describe them as “stayers.” Compared to migrants, stayers have received less attention in migration research (for exceptions, see Brettell 1986; Cohen 2002; Haenn 2020; Smith 2006). Their temporal horizons (Amrith 2021), aspirations, and ideas of well-being often remain unknown (Boccagni and Erdal 2021).

For migrants and stayers alike, the newly constructed houses built with the remittances from the absent migrants stand for the good life. In a paradoxical way, these remittance houses connect nostalgic longings and future aspirations. By building a remittance house in their home village, the absent owners hope to preserve their attachment to the village. In their nostalgic view, the village has become an idle and peaceful place not touched by change (Pauli and Bedorf 2018). During their absence and upon their return to the village, migrants long for what they imagine as a more harmonious village past. At the same time, the architecture and materiality of remittance houses differs strongly from local forms of house construction (Boccagni and Erdal 2021; Lopez 2015). The new forms of construction materialize future-oriented ideas of living and a good life. Remittance houses are thus the main reason why the appearance of rural Mexico has changed so profoundly (figure 7.1).

The very limited opportunity structures in rural Mexico further complicate this paradoxical construction of the good life. Employment beyond agriculture is hardly available in Pueblo Nuevo and other rural Mexican areas. To make a living and own a house, people have to leave and migrate. Similar to the largely disappointed expectations of the Zambian Copperbelt workers described by James Ferguson (1999), aspirations of Pueblo Nuevo migrants can hardly ever be fulfilled. To have a house in the village, migrants cannot live in the village. This situation leads to “frustrated freedom” (Fischer 2014, 155–156) and “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017). The desire for well-being has become an obstacle to the migrants’ well-being (Berlant 2011, 1). Sarah Lynn Lopez also notes this problematic aspect of remittance houses. She observes that discourses on the migrants’ building of houses and belonging in their areas of origin are generally future-oriented and optimistic: “Remittance space is largely about building aspirations, desires, and hopes into the Mexican landscape” (Lopez 2015, 171). But she argues there is in



Figure 7.1. The entrance gate of a rural Mexican household, decorated with the license plates of absent family members working in the United States, 2013. Photograph by Julia Pauli.

fact a more hidden layer of meaning, which requires research that pays more attention to the “inherent paradoxes and contradictions of remittance space” (171). An awareness of these troubling consequences of migrants’ aspirations might also be an explanation for the way in which the women valued the present when I asked them about their ideas of the good life.

Since 1995, I have repeatedly returned to Pueblo Nuevo for fieldwork (Pauli 2000, 2008, 2020). A planned field stay in November 2020 had to be postponed to 2022 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. During the ongoing pandemic, I kept connected with the village through social media, especially WhatsApp. The information collected through these means, however, does not have the same complexity as data collected through in-person fieldwork. Therefore, the analysis offered here is mainly based on ethnographic data collected in person, thus participant observation, supplemented by life and migration histories and repeated ethnographic census collections (Pauli 2000, 2013, 2020).²

BEFORE LEAVING: ADRIANA’S WISH TO STAY HOME

Adriana and I were taking a walk through Pueblo Nuevo. It was a rainy Sunday in March 2013. Pointing to various houses in different states of construction, Adriana told me the stories of their absent owners. A woman, followed by two small children, greeted us on her way to the local store. Adriana smiled at her and told

me that she feels sorry for her. “You know, we were friends in high school,” Adriana explained.³ The information surprised me. Twenty-five-year-old Adriana seemed much younger than the tired-looking woman who had just passed us. “She is a bit older than me, though, late twenties,” Adriana said, “and she is the mother of five children.” Adriana’s friend and her family were living in two small quarters on her husband’s family compound. The husband had tried several times, unsuccessfully, to get into the United States as an undocumented migrant. “This is exactly what I try to avoid,” Adriana said. “There is no point in marrying when you have to live a life like this.” All she wanted was to stay a bit longer, “un poco más,” in her parents’ house: “I like the way I live.” She emphasized that she was not against marriage or having children. Maybe later in life. Currently, she maintained, she did not want to leave home. She started to hum the melody of “Un poco más.”

I met Adriana in 1996. During my first yearlong fieldwork in Pueblo Nuevo between 1996 and 1997, Adriana was one of the girls in the ballet class I taught at the village school (Pauli 2000). At the age of eight, she was a shy, skinny girl very similar to all other girls in the village. Sixteen years later, Adriana was in many ways not like other women of her age. Most of them were married and had several children. Economically, her peers depended on the incomes of their husbands. Adriana was not married and had no children. She was working as a supervisor of teachers for the local school administration. She and her father were the main breadwinners in the household where she lived. Her younger brother was also living in the household, working as a farmer and migrant. When she had completed high school, Adriana’s parents decided to finance her further education with earnings from the father’s migration. She became a teacher. In a cultural setting like Pueblo Nuevo, where marriage is still compulsory for women, this was an unusual path for a young woman.⁴

Adriana’s view on the good life, actually *her* good life, provides a first insight into why some women in Pueblo Nuevo not only aspire for the future, or long for the past, but also want to prolong the present. First, Adriana realized what she would lose if she left her parental home. Her sense of an ending of the good life was informed by her knowledge of many unhappy relationships around her. Adriana knew how difficult life could be for young women in their mothers-in-law’s households. Many daughters-in-law suffered and hoped to move into a remittance house built by their absent husbands, so they could leave their mothers-in-law’s houses (Pauli 2007a, 2008, 2013). Instead of suffering from economic hardship and humiliations in a mother-in-law’s household, Adriana enjoyed her life in her parents’ household. She earned her own income and had a say in how it was spent. Second, Adriana compared her life with the life of her high school friend. She was aware of the good in her good life and the bad in her friend’s bad life. These two forms of comparison—the more general one with women her age in the village and a more specific one with her friend—reinforced her conviction that she was already living a good life.⁵ Adriana’s view was in tension with the existing gender norms and roles in the village that expected women to marry and have

children. To prevent becoming an outsider, Adriana said, she might marry one day. By 2021, however, Adriana had not married or left her parental home, still enjoying her single good life.

Adriana's mother, Alma, also wanted to hold on to the moment. Wishing to prolong the present, Alma shared some interesting similarities with her daughter's view. Both women compared their lives with the lives of other women. These comparisons helped them to understand why they valued their own present. Alma's cherishing of the moment, however, was not based on the valuation of unusual living circumstances. Instead, her wish for a bit more time, a bit more of the present, stemmed from her fear of losing the ones she loved.

BEFORE LOSING: ALMA'S HOPE FOR THE WELL-BEING OF HER PARENTS

Alma emphasized that she was content with her life. "This is how I want to live the remaining thirty years of my life," she told me. We had been talking about changes in the village, remarking on new houses and improvements of infrastructure, such as paved roads, electricity, and water. Our conversation took place in March 2013, a couple of days after I had gone for the walk with Adriana. We were drinking coffee in Alma's kitchen. Although her husband, Antonio—forty-nine years old and four years older than she—had migrated to the United States, the couple had not built a fancy remittance house. Instead, they had invested the money in improving their adobe brick house. They had built a bathroom, a living room, and new bedrooms. They also bought kitchen utensils, a new television set, a telephone, and a computer. Comparing her house to some of the very fancy remittance houses in the village, Alma told me that the price the absent owners had paid for such luxury was excessive. "You know," she said, "some of them got involved with the cartels. Others are even missing, probably dead." She was referring to a group of men from Pueblo Nuevo who went missing some years earlier. Their families had searched for their bodies in morgues across northern Mexico, unsuccessfully. Like her daughter Adriana, Alma compared her life with that of her peers. She concluded that it is better to value what one has and not to always want more. Unlike many other men in the village, Antonio, Alma's husband, was reluctant to migrate to *el norte*. He was a respected and hardworking man. Many migrants entrusted him with the care of their fields during their absences. This did not lead to a high income, but the family was able to survive. Only after Alma had a severe car accident and the family desperately needed the money to pay the hospital bills did Antonio migrate, without documents, in 2001. He was arrested at the border and spent some months in a U.S. prison. After this traumatic experience, he waited several years before migrating again, this time with papers and following the work invitation of his brother, who had established himself as a businessperson in Virginia.

I asked Alma what she thought is a good life. With a sigh, she told me that she hoped that God would let her parents live a little bit longer so that they could enjoy one another's company. She wanted to have "just a little bit more time with them." Again, the song "Un poco más" came up. Alma was worried that environmental

pollution might affect the health of her parents and of other older villagers. One of the most polluted rivers in Mexico, the Río Lerma, flows through the Solís valley, causing anxiety and physical illnesses among the valley's inhabitants. Alma was also concerned about the effects of family conflict and crisis on her parents. She described how much her parents suffered when their daughter Yolanda, who was living in the United States, left again after a visit home. "They are crying," Alma said. "It is very painful. They do not know if they will ever see her again. If the family will ever be united." When Yolanda was home, the family tried to do everything to make the moment last. They organized barbecues, cooked and ate together, and visited friends and relatives. But the art of living together despite the knowledge of its ending was undermined by family conflict. One of Alma's sisters was jealous, feeling their parents were preferring her sisters to her. She had stopped visiting them. Alma hoped that the conflict would end. "It is too much for my parents to have to endure," Alma told me. "I do not want to lose them."

Alma's way to hold on to the moment and value the present resembled her daughter Adriana's view insofar as both women realized what they could lose. Where Adriana feared losing her independence and her home, Alma was afraid of losing the company of the ones she loved: her husband, if he were to get involved with the cartels to build her a fancy house; her parents, if they were stressed too much because of health problems and family crises. The women's appreciation of the present was also an embodiment, a physically felt sentiment, of their anxieties about the future. Alma and Adriana reached their understanding of what was of value in their lives through comparison with the lives of others. This enabled them to cherish the way they lived their lives. Aspiring only for the future or longing for the past could jeopardize this everyday contentment.

Alma and Adriana differed in how they viewed the role of God. Both women were of the Catholic faith. Adriana hardly mentioned God at all, while Alma credited God for giving and taking time and lives. For Alma, it was up to God whether her (good) present life continued. Another difference between Adriana and Alma related to aging and the body. Alma had experienced severe physical pain. Her accident had brought her near death. Since then, she closely observed her body, seeing its aging but also its resilience. This bodily awareness also informed the way she saw her parents' aging and their illnesses. She knew that their (good) time together could rapidly end. This perception resembled the view of her mother, Regina.

BEFORE LETTING GO: REGINA'S DESIRE FOR CONTROL

After having listened to Adriana and Alma, I asked Regina if she would also talk with me about her ideas on the good life. She agreed and invited me to have a late breakfast, *un almuerzo*, with her. Between tortillas and hot chocolate, she told me about her health problems, her marriage, and her financial worries. Social security and pensions were almost nonexistent in rural Mexico. Older people survived on a mixture of kin support (often remittances), work, and temporary state subsidies. Since the mid-2000s, the state-run Oportunidades program was also active

in Pueblo Nuevo.⁶ My 2013 census indicates that state support for older people nevertheless remained minimal (Pauli and Bedorf 2018). When their grandson Manuel, who was living with them, was still attending school, Oportunidades granted Regina and her husband, Angel, a small allowance every two months. When Manuel quit school, the payments stopped. From then on, the couple only received a food basket every two months. Income from work and remittances from a daughter supplemented the food basket. Angel, sixty-seven years old, still produced and sold traditional adobe roof tiles. Sixty-one-year-old Regina sold her homemade tamales, a popular Mexican street food made of corn, to pupils at the village school during their breaks. Her feet were hurting when she walked. Regina would have preferred to stop selling tamales but needed the money. Of her five daughters and one son, only her daughter Yolanda sent money regularly from the United States. Her other migrant daughter, Candela, hardly ever remitted; she also seldom returned to Pueblo Nuevo to visit her parents. In their youth, Regina and Angel had migrated to Mexico City for work, but since returning to the village when they were in their thirties, they never left again. They lived close to their daughter Alma in a modest house built with funds from a previous federal housing program.

Apart from economic worries, health problems related to aging were also occupying Regina. A few years earlier, a doctor diagnosed her with asthma.⁷ With the help of her son, she was receiving treatment. From time to time, Regina got strong headaches, especially when she had walked too much and her feet were aching. “With age one loses strength,” she told me, “but there is still some strength left. I am still in control.” She hoped that with God’s help her control over her life would last a bit longer, at least “un poco más.”

Although Regina’s life was not easy, she was nevertheless content with it. Reflecting on the death of her widowed mother-in-law, Isabel, she described what it meant to lose control of one’s life. This comparison generated insights into what could be lost. Isabel’s death was embedded in a long-term conflict between Isabel’s youngest daughter, Leticia, and Isabel’s eldest son, Angel, Regina’s husband. For many years, Isabel was living in a house adjacent to her son Angel. On a daily basis, the couple and Isabel shared with, and supported, each other. When Isabel was sick, Regina cared for her. Isabel’s daughter Leticia, upon her marriage, had left Pueblo Nuevo and moved to a different village in the valley of Solís. At the age of eighty, Isabel was diagnosed with cancer. When it became evident that Isabel’s health was deteriorating, Leticia took her mother to live with her, without consulting Angel and Regina. A short time later, Isabel died in Leticia’s house. Angel and Regina were infuriated and felt appalled. Leticia, as the youngest daughter, had the cultural obligation to care for the mother. Following the rule of ultimogeniture, she would inherit Isabel’s house in return for this care (Pauli 2008; Pauli and Bedorf 2016). “But when did Leticia come to care? Only at the very end!” Regina told me with bitterness. “She should have left Isabel in our care and in her house. She would have lasted a bit longer.” Regina was convinced that the move out of her house was against Isabel’s will. But Isabel had lost control. Regina concluded that it was crucial to keep control over one’s life. This was the essence of the good life, she explained

to me. With a wink, she continued that she and her husband had taken care of the problem of inheritance, care, and ultimogeniture: “We have made our will with a solicitor. We will not tell our children who inherits what. They should all care for us. And not only at the very end.” Thinking through what had happened to others and comparing this to her own life, Regina came to a positive evaluation of her present life, despite all the challenges and hardships she faced. Regina hoped that this present life would last a bit longer. Her practice of comparing and evaluating was similar to her daughter’s and granddaughter’s reflections on the present.

Comparison with others can also motivate future aspirations. One desires something someone else already has. This type of emulation stimulated the boom in house constructions in Pueblo Nuevo. The wish of these women to prolong the present, however, differed from these forms of future-oriented aspirations and comparisons. Emulation did not motivate the women’s holding on to the moment. Rather, the opposite. The women wanted to prevent and not emulate something. Depending on their generation and age, what they wanted to prevent varied. In accordance with her stage in the life course, Adriana questioned the norm of compulsory marriage and patrilocal residence, instead enjoying her well-being as an unmarried, economically independent woman. Middle-aged Alma was more aware of life’s fragilities than her daughter Adriana. She hoped that, with the help of God, sickness and death could be kept at bay, at least a little bit longer. Regina, finally, had accepted that sickness and death were part of her life. But she was afraid of losing control. She wanted to prevent illness from taking over her life. It was thus not an imagined future good that led the women to cherish the present. Quite the contrary, it was the reflection on what could be worse or lost that prompted them to appreciate the present.

Regina’s narrative, however, was a reflection not only on what could be lost but also on what she had gained. Regina compared herself not only to other women. She also contrasted her momentary life with that of her husband, concluding that her current marital circumstances were much better than in the past. Similar to the reasoning of other older women in the community, Regina’s reflections on her marital present were thus also a way of thinking through the different phases of married life.

TRANQUILITY, FINALLY

With a twinkle, Regina told me that, for some time now, she was in control of her and her husband’s lives. This gave her a deep sense of satisfaction. Over the years, we had repeatedly talked about her husband’s addiction to alcohol. Many times I had seen Regina fearfully worrying about her husband’s health and the family’s economic survival. After a physical breakdown several years earlier, her husband had stopped drinking. Since then, she said, life had become so much calmer, “mucho más tranquilo.” There were no more fights between them about her husband’s whereabouts and how he spent their money. Instead, the couple enjoyed being together, having nice dinners without alcohol, visiting family, or just sitting

in front of their house and greeting the neighbors passing by. Due to his long-term addiction, her husband's health had deteriorated. Although Regina was struggling with health issues herself, she nevertheless felt stronger than her husband. To show me that she was now in charge, she commented that remittances were always sent to her, never to her husband. Yolanda, the remitting daughter, knew that her mother, and not her father, was now responsible for household decisions.

Other women in their sixties and seventies who talked with me about aspirations and well-being also mentioned tranquility, *tranquilidad*, as something they had finally achieved in their lives and wanted to hold on to. Many women stressed how much they had suffered during the earlier years of their marriages, enduring too many insecurities, pains, and fears. Domestic violence was (and still is) common in the village (Pauli 2000, 2007b), and many women had suffered from physical and psychological abuse. In several interviews during the 1990s and 2000s, Clara, Adriana's other grandmother and Regina's *comadre*,⁸ had told me about the decades-long abuse she had suffered at the hands of her husband, who had beaten her and had cheated on her. She had repeatedly considered leaving him. It was thus a surprise when, on my return in 2013, Clara, now in her sixties, greeted me in an upright position and with a big smile on her face in front of her eldest daughter's impressive remittance house. Her husband, now in his seventies, was standing next to her but appeared broken. He was bent over, apparently with strong back pain. Clara addressed him as "viejito," the diminutive for an elder man, telling me that her "viejito" had lost all his power. With an almost wicked smile, she looked him in the eyes and told him that he did not need to worry, as she was now taking care of everything. He only smiled vaguely. Clara was clearly enjoying her late-won control over her and her husband's lives, hoping that this state of affairs would last long.

The tranquility many women in later life experienced in Pueblo Nuevo was related to their social embedding and the changes in their marriages. At the beginning of married life, women felt very lonely and were subjected to mistreatment by their husbands and affines, especially their mothers-in-law (Pauli 2000, 2008). Over the years, that often changed. With the birth of children, women steadily built an increasingly larger social network of children, *comadres*, and neighbors (Pauli 2000). The networks of older men, in contrast, were much smaller. Remitting children almost always sent their remittances to their mothers to collect at the local Western Union branch. Many daughters were very outspoken in their support of their older mothers, stressing that they had seen and committed to memory the multiple pains their mothers had had to endure in their marriages. Clara's daughter had included a beautiful, large room for her mother in her remittance house but no room for her father. In addition to the support and care older women received from daughters, *comadres*, and neighbors, most women in their sixties and seventies were also in better health than their husbands. Older women thus had more strength and social support than their husbands to manage the everyday challenges of older age, enabling them to take over decisions previously controlled by their husbands.

Finally, women in their sixties and seventies also contemplated the hopes and aspirations of younger women. These considerations mainly related to marriage. There was no consensus among older women of when a woman was entitled to what kinds of aspirations. Some older women like Regina told me that younger women, for example, her granddaughter Adriana, had lost the ability to endure hardship. For Regina, well-being and the good life were not a given but had to be achieved through many years of hard work and the endurance of humiliation and struggle. To her, Adriana's unwillingness to marry and move out of her parental home was a sign of weakness. By contrast, Clara welcomed that younger women had become more demanding, not tolerating everything anymore. One of Clara's daughters was divorced. To be divorced is still very rare in rural Mexico (Willis 2014). Clara supported her daughter's decision to aspire for a life on her own and leave behind the constraints of an unhappy marriage. Why wait all your life for the good life, she asked me, if maybe you can have it earlier? Clara's wish to prolong her present, her hard-won tranquility, extended into an aspiration for the well-being of other women's lives, especially her daughters'.

CONCLUSION

Aspirations often motivate transnational migration. Migrants and stayers hope that through migration their living circumstances will improve (Cohen 2002). Women of all ages staying in Mexican villages like Pueblo Nuevo do not passively wait for the return of their migrating husbands or sons (Haenn 2020; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017). Instead, they actively build their future by building remittance houses, "houses of their own" (Pauli 2008). However, after more than twenty years of transnational migration from Pueblo Nuevo, it is now time to ask what happens when the building of the remittance house is finally finished and most of the desired consumption objects have been bought? I suggest that the valuation of the present—which, to my surprise, was the dominant temporal horizon (Amrith 2021) in my talks with women in Pueblo Nuevo about the good life—may also be interpreted as a new phase in the migration process (see also Otaegui, this volume). It is a phase following the fulfillment of some aspirations. In this phase, the goal is less about acquiring than it is about keeping what is there. Knowledge about potential losses, based on one's own experiences and the comparison with and evaluation of the lives of others, intensifies this appreciation of the present.

While the fulfillment of material aspirations helps to explain some of the sentiments to prolong the present, it does not take age and generation into account. Comparing women of three different generations shows that, despite their shared wish to hold on to the moment, the reasoning behind these "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) varies among them. Jackson (2011, xi) rightly points out that the well-being of the young differs from the well-being of the old. Adriana's well-being and her cherishing of her present is also a provocation against local norms. Her father's income from migration enabled Adriana to live this life. She is proud of her vitality and her accomplishments. Regina is not as energetic as her grand-

daughter. Her art of living in the contemporary is calmer and more accepting of life's pains and troubles. Middle-aged Alma is in between her mother and her daughter. Her effort to have a good life in the company of loved ones accepts the impediments of life while still trying to overcome them.

Further, there is also variation within generations. Adriana, the youngest woman, clearly differs from most women her age in Pueblo Nuevo. Women in their twenties and thirties in Pueblo Nuevo are seldom satisfied with their lives. A migrating husband is often their only hope for a better future. Adriana, in contrast, is independent of a migrating husband. Although her case is unusual, I suggest that her desire for autonomy foreshadows changes in gender roles already well underway in Mexico, especially in urban areas (Esteinou 2014; Willis 2014). Increasingly, women decide to stay single, like Adriana, or opt out of marriage by divorce, like one of Clara's daughters (Davidson and Hannaford 2023). Older women discuss these changes. Some, like Regina, criticize younger women's aspirations for early well-being, stressing that to reach tranquility and well-being it takes time and hard work. Others, like Clara, welcome the changes, encouraging younger women to go ahead in their search for a better life. The art of living (Lambek 2008) and the wish to prolong the present before it ends are thus reflections about one's own life and the lives of others like granddaughters, daughters, mothers-in-law, parents, or husbands.

The women's wish to prolong the moment, *un poco más*, before it ends, is also their way to navigate through the multiple insecurities of their lives. With no social security to speak of and meager, unsteady incomes, women of all generations face existential uncertainties (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017). Awareness of one's own aging and increasing bodily fragility, experienced more often by older women, however, enhances the urgency to cherish what the moment offers. Women in later life in Pueblo Nuevo gain satisfaction from still being in control. This satisfaction is comparable to the feelings expressed by residents of a geriatric institution for abandoned elderly on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, who stated, after preparing and sharing a delicious meal, "Es lindo ver que todavía podemos: it is rewarding to see that we still can" (Zegarra Chiappori 2019, 63). The aspiration to (still) be capable and in charge, in this very moment, weighs more than any future dream for the older women in Pueblo Nuevo, to stay like this only a little bit longer, only *un poco más*.

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NOTES

1. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I have changed personal information that is not crucial for my argument.
2. Most of the data analyzed here was collected within the project "Ageing in Transnational Space: Processes of (Re)migration between Mexico and the USA," funded by the German Science Foundation (grant SCHN 1103/3-1), from 2010 to 2013, with Michael Schnegg and me as project leaders. Michael Schnegg, Franziska Bedorf, and Susanne Lea Radt participated in data collection in 2010 and 2013.
3. The account here and elsewhere in the chapter is based on field notes and interview data that I translated from Spanish into English.
4. Research on single women in societies where marriage is normative is still rare (Lamb 2018).
5. Recently, more attention is being paid to comparison as a central way of knowledge production in anthropology (Schnegg and Lowe 2020).
6. The program has since ended.
7. Regina's asthma might also be the reason why she almost died from a COVID-19 infection in late 2020. Her daughter and granddaughter cared for her at home.
8. The Mexican *compadrazgo* system has emerged from the Catholic practice of godparenthood. However, unlike in Europe, where the most important relationship is that between godparent and godchild, the most important relationship in the Mexican *compadrazgo* system is that between the godparents (classified as *comadre* and *compadre*) and the parents of the child (Schnegg 2007).

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