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Her heritage trail

By ALEX ESPINOZA

Mexican Enough

My Life Between the Borderlines

Stephanie Elizondo Griest

Washington Square Press: 320 pp., \$14 paper

IT BEGINS with a memory: A 6-year-old girl hurls herself in front of a moving car. Sustaining a badly split lip and nothing more, a young Stephanie Elizondo Griest decides that automobiles are best avoided altogether. The specter of children dashing across the asphalt, "perhaps images of my former self," haunts her on those rare occasions when she does drive. So call it divine intervention or simple chance when Griest, en route to Corpus Christi, Texas, from Los Angeles, encounters a group of people, one a child, darting across a hot stretch of Interstate 10. It is a startling image — unnerving, crystalline, visceral — meant, it seems, exclusively for her on this isolated ribbon of highway. "My lifelong phantom has actualized," she writes.

Prompted in part by that encounter, Griest determines she must venture south of the *frontera* to make peace with the elusive "Mexicana" inside of her, the side she tried so hard to eradicate as a child because of stigmas and preconceptions, only to embrace it as a young adult in order to reap its benefits. She confesses: "Nearly every accolade I have received... has been at least partly due to the genetic link I share with the people charging through the snake-infested brush."

But if it is guilt made manifest on a lonely freeway that drives Griest to bid a temporary adios to her Brooklyn apartment and board a plane for Mexilandia, it is her steadfast and shrewd journalism that prevents "Mexican Enough: My Life Between the Borderlines" from becoming a puerile vision quest. Instead, it speaks with such ferocious and unyielding honesty that it is difficult to ignore this work.

Griest combs the country and encounters priests, gay rights activists, a half-Vietnamese

dominatrix and workers returning home from the U.S. for the first time in years. She attends protests, a *quinceañera* and a baptism deep in Zapatista territory, all the while driven by an almost manic desire to figure out the common denominator bonding her to this nation and its people.

At first, everything is simple enough as Griest embarks on her pilgrimage. She moves into a house full of gay men in the ultraconservative state of Querétaro. Her roommates, who christen her "Fanni," teach her the concept of being *flojo* (lazy) and take her dancing in Mexico City's hip, glitzy Zona Rosa district. She attends a *tucha libre* match and interviews wrestlers with catchy monikers like Atómico and Dance Boy. She chases down the ghosts of dead ancestors in the dusty town of Crullas in Tamaulipas.

Griest moves on to more serious concerns as the salsa music fades and the taste of too many *aguas frescas* wears off. Back in Querétaro, she investigates the death of Octavio Acuña, a gay activist who ran a shop selling condoms, adult novelties and safe-sex pamphlets — taboo subjects in a region where Catholicism is king. The facts surrounding Acuña's death and the lackadaisical attitude the authorities display in investigating the crime are ominous and chilling. Just as unsettling are the statistics Griest supplies about the disappearances and killings of dissidents, like the 2001 murder of Sister Digna Ochoa, a well-known human rights attorney and activist.

In Oaxaca, Griest meets Claudia, a young Zapotec orphan being looked after by a boutique owner who is building an orphanage with money she makes catering to tourists. Claudia is charming and quick-witted, and she and Griest instantly bond. For a while, Griest considers adopting the child herself. She "envision[s] what this world would be like. Baking Christmas cookies... placing a cool cloth on her forehead when she breaks a fever." But is displacing Claudia from her own rich heritage the solution to the girl's ills? Griest takes stock of her own situation and wonders whether stability and cultural soli-



ALEXANDRE MENECHINI/Associated Press

TRAVELS: Griest leaves her Brooklyn home on a quest to figure out how Mexican she truly is.

arity trump opportunities only El Norte can provide.

Griest — author of "Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana" and co-author of "100 Places Every Woman Should Go" — is at her best when she's flexing her journalistic muscles, excavating information, assembling and supplying facts and statistics, and putting a human face on complex issues. At times the narrative slips into romantic daydreams and obsessions with relationships, more the stuff of a journal than journalism. Pat observations about the amount of Coca-Cola that Mexicans consume or their obsession with death and carnage add nothing new and serve only as distractions. There are also moments when physical descriptions echo those of a 19th century European ethnography, where a "flat Zapotec nose" and "Olmec faces" reduce the people to museum artifacts, oddly fascinating and exotic.

Nevertheless, through it all, one thing is undeniable about Griest: This *chica's* got guts. The systematic self-incrimination she repeatedly displays and the frenzied compulsions fueling her quest to figure out just how Mexican she truly is — if at all — are what make Griest's work important. It speaks to the larger truths all biethnic individuals are fixated on but aren't always as willing to expose with such intense honesty and nerve. So we continue watching with an interest best described as uneasy. We know what is at stake for this writer, for all hyphenated Americans confronting their heritages, each curious to see what happens when Griest chooses to fling herself in front of the next moving vehicle, hoping the epiphany it heralds will be enough.

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