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In loving memory of Edna Viruell-Fuentes

Natalie Lira asked us to reflect on how Edna shaped our understanding and approach to the current moment—a time in history when anti-immigrant views and actions have reached a new high in the U.S. and in other countries. Natalie also asked us to reflect on Edna's impact on our lives as a scholar, colleague, and friend, and the memories, lessons, or pieces of advice from Edna we should take with us moving forward. I will try to answer these questions presenting some memories from my years of friendship and collaboration with Edna.

When Natalie invited me to speak today, I reached out to a group of close colleagues and friends of Edna to ask them to contribute their thoughts. I have compiled them in a short document, which I would like to share with Sunil and her family. I was moved to see in the tributes to Edna how much we valued her and how much we agree about her contributions to the field.

But what follows is my own tribute to Edna.

Edna and I were born in the same year in Mexico City. Had we stayed in Mexico, our paths may have never crossed but they did cross here in the United States in 2000.

Edna came to the United States as an immigrant, and attended college soon after her arrival. She had overcome many obstacles and excelled in everything she had been determined to accomplish. I know from Dr. Annette Ramirez de Arellano (former program officer for the Kellogg pre-doctoral fellowship) that when Edna applied, the selection committee was so impressed with her qualifications and her statement of purpose that they decided to reconsider some of the policies regarding the fellowship. At that point, Edna was not a U.S. permanent resident yet, which was required in order to apply for the fellowship. However, her statement convinced the selection committee that, as an immigrant, she was already a member of U.S. society and should be considered. Edna did eventually get the Kellogg fellowship, which enabled her to attend Michigan University, where she worked with a stellar scholar in our field, Dr. Sherman James.

I met Edna in June 2000; Edna changed my life and I am not sure she knew she did. In 2000, she was a Kellogg Foundation pre-doctoral fellow—she held the Kellogg Fellowship in Health Policy Research for her doctoral studies at the University of Michigan. Along with other fellows, she was going to attend a Kellogg retreat in upstate New York. We had never met. She had found one of my first publications from my dissertation research and asked that the organizing committee invite me to present at the retreat. I presented my research on the effects of racial residential segregation on health disparities. Dr. Henrie Treadwell, a Kellogg foundation program officer who was at the retreat, liked my work and asked me if I would work on a project to create indicators of quality of life for U.S. cities to identify good places, to work, live and raise a family for minority families. Although this was closely related to my research on racial segregation and inequality, it also meant a departure from a traditional academic career. I would undertake developing a public facing project that would become a resource for the field. Henrie wanted me to work with the Center for the Advancement of Health led by Barbara Krimgold, who would handle the dissemination and outreach. It was a hard decision, but I eventually said yes and embraced the work, which I continue to do today. This presentation is not about me but I could not start talking about

Edna without acknowledging that she changed my life, she changed my career path through this seemingly small act of inviting me to present at the Kellogg retreat.

Edna was a great connector of people—as she did with me and Kellogg—and a great connector of ideas, of organizations, countries, worlds, and cultures. That is the first big lesson from Edna. Think big and help make connections –deep connections—we should never be too busy that we forget to do that.

In 2005, Edna came to the Harvard School of Public Health as a postdoc—she held the Yerby/Kellogg Post-doctoral Research Fellowship; she was the highest ranked applicant—and I had the honor of being one of her mentors; one of her colleagues. At about the same time, Reanne Frank, another great immigration scholar who has done binational work, also came to HSPH as a postdoc. A couple of years earlier, Emma Sanchez had joined our doctoral program with a Kellogg fellowship and I had the honor of working as her advisor.

It would be an unlikely situation today, and it was even more unlikely then: four researchers interested in immigration, three of us Mexican immigrant women (each with our own Mexicanidad, as Emma says) at an Ivy League university trying to find our place in academic public health research. It was unlikely, and it was difficult, but more than anything, it was fun and exciting.

I sometimes imagine what would have happened if we could have been together longer working in the same place with a common purpose, but that was not possible then and it would probably not be possible today. So, we have to do exactly what Edna did: use those rare instances where we can converge in the same place to build long-lasting connections, and work to make new connections despite distance, institutional resistance and lack of funding.

Edna, Emma, Reanne and I were together for a couple of years but we used them well and we tried to do the research we believed in. We worked together and with other colleagues, we talked a lot, we laughed and sometimes we were frustrated of how difficult it was to change things.

I recently found an email between us from May 2006. We were organizing a showing of the movie A Day without a Mexican, and on the same day—May Day, Día del Trabajo—we were joining a march "Walkout for Immigrant Rights"—a general strike--in Harvard Square and later having dinner at Tu y Yo. Little did we know then that even worse forms of exclusion, violence, discrimination, and xenophobia against Mexican immigrants would start showing their ugly face ten years later.

We showed the movie A Day Without a Mexican at HSPH, which was an unusual thing to do and we were probably a bit nervous about it. There was no reason to worry. Nobody showed up other than our small group and our reaction was to laugh at the lack of interest and watch and enjoy the movie ourselves.

Edna was able to achieve a beautiful balance. She did her work with her Mexican identity at the center, and she was truly a global person, a global researcher. On one hand, she had a strong identity and pride in her background and did meaningful research highlighting injustices against Latino immigrants. On the other hand, Edna was a global woman and scholar, the opposite of provincial or narrow.

Another thing I shared with her was having married outside our cultures. Edna always spoke lovingly of Sunil and Nepal. She was delighted to have found another world and culture that she made her own.

In her research of course, she advanced the field by theorizing and studying empirically how immigrants live transnational lives. She did try very hard to do binational work in Mexico and the U.S. She tried for years and was eventually able to start binational collaborations. We applied together and got very small grants from the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American studies at Harvard to hold meetings with U.S. and Mexican colleagues to try to develop binational collaborations. To give you a sense of how transformative this work was, we had to start with convincing the David Rockefeller Center that Latin American immigrants in the U.S.—not just Latin American countries—should be part of their focus.

We did wonders with very little funds. Edna and others volunteered so much work and eventually we were able to add an immigration module to a census conducted by the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública in two small communities, Santa Catarina and Tepoztlán, in the state of Morelos.

Her work to change the field was tireless and she did a lot of this work on a shoestring. We created a network of scholars called Place, Migration and Health, published a special issue of the journal Social Science & Medicine on this topic, and went to Bellagio Italy for a conference funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Edna was at the center of all these efforts and small victories, always volunteering her brilliant brain and work. And she did have (as we did too) amazing hadas madrinas—like Barbara Krimgold and Debra Perez—who along the way advocated on behalf of our agenda and provided support to Edna—and to us—at critical moments.

There are several lessons from Edna here. First, we should focus not only on our own work and advancement, but we should have a vision, and try to move the whole field along, and help our colleagues along the way.

Even today, it is difficult to get funding for immigration research. It was incredibly hard then. We had to work behind the scenes and use whatever funding we could get with the hope that one day there would be more resources for this work.

Today, Covid has underscored the importance of immigrants in the U.S. and painfully exposed deep inequities between immigrant families and non-immigrant families. I hope that, because of this, we will have a better chance to advance Edna's research agenda and give it a bigger platform, which it so deserves.

Edna changed our thinking in public health and related disciplines about the way to study immigrants and their health. She was revolutionary in her thinking and even today her call to examine the experience of immigrants, especially Latino immigrants focusing on structural inequality and discrimination is often ignored at our peril. Even today in discussions about equity, Hispanics/Latinos are often not mentioned—or if mentioned, it is only in passing. Today, we have a responsibility to honor Edna by calling out sidelining Hispanic/Latino issues—how can we imagine and build a better future while sidelining 25% of the U.S. child population?

We have a responsibility to call out racism and discrimination in our immigration policies, in the exclusion of immigrant families from the social safety net even during times like the present pandemic that are showing the critical importance of the work that immigrants carry out. Since Edna passed away, I have gone back to reading her papers and I am making sure her ideas live in the work that I am doing today. Please do the same. Your work will be better for it.

Edna was gentle and sweet in her demeanor, yet she was so strong and radical in what she proposed. She disliked the intellectual provincialism of confining Latino and immigrant issues to simplistic

paradigms focused on “culture” and challenged notions as acculturation. Her thinking was profoundly radical.

Edna also challenged research paradigms that try to romanticize the Latino experience—her work adds and builds on the work of other great scholars like Cecilia Menjivar. Edna conducted research showing that Latino immigrants do not necessarily have strong social networks to rely on.

Edna was fiercely rigorous and analytical and tried like many of us to understand the sources of the paradoxes among the Latino population, on unexpected resilience in the face of adversity. But she also wanted to point out the great threats to this resilience such as discrimination, and to highlight that the buffers that we often attribute to Latinos such as family ties and social networks may not be enough to counteract the material adversity we face.

Edna had a very sophisticated research mind. She never opted for the easy way and she embraced complexity. Today, at a moment when provincialism, simplistic answers and half-truths tend to prevail, we can keep Edna’s memory alive by embracing her deep desire to understand the world of immigrants and her commitment to challenge conventional wisdoms and lazy answers.

Edna was a systems thinker and she did the exhausting legwork to try to change institutions and disciplines. While she was at Harvard, she collaborated with others to highlight the inequitable access to resources that postdocs in different programs had—and gently pointed to the racial and ethnic differences in the participants in those programs. I remember only one time where she questioned why she had to do so much just to get equal access to resources. But it was only in passing and as always with a big smile. She knew—we knew—that the answer was yes. Maybe luckily, we were not aware that our fight was probably not even recognized or seen.

Edna, we really miss you. I really miss you. You have so much to say today. It is our responsibility and an honor to carry on your scholarship, your ideas, your desire to connect people, disciplines and countries. Maybe the time has come for our work to have a bigger platform—which it should have had—and if the time has not come, we will keep fighting in your memory until it does.