

Maria Reyna interviewed by Tigida Fadiga  
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Bronx, NY

My name is Tigida and I am interviewing Maria. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Maria: Of course yes

Tigida: Thank you, our first question is where did you grow up?

M: I grew up in El Salvador. It's a country located in Central America. I did not grow up in the city, I grow up in a small village in El Salvador named Cara Sucia.

T: That's the name of the village?

M: Yes

T: What does it mean?

M: Oh well, if you translate it in English it means dirty face.

T: Is there any history behind the name of the village?

M: No not really.

T: Do you have any idea why they named it Cara Sucia?

M: No, I never searched about it.

T: Why is that?

M: I don't know they just named it Cara Sucia. People usually make the name shorter and they call it Cara Chuga.

T: Do you think they named it Cara Sucia because of the type of village it is?

M: I think it's because in the past there used to be a lot of poor families like really poor. They used to have kids and the kids are always dirty. That's the only story I've heard from my mom. It's like dirty sad faces.

T: Oh! Because that's what I was thinking about. The name Cara Sucia has something historical. Maybe people who used to live there had economic issues.

M: Yes

T: Well thank you for sharing.

T: Why is where you grow up limited?

M: My country and the village I grew up are limited to a lot of resources. For example, we are limited to electricity. It's a very poor village and everybody there doesn't really have jobs. They only go out to go sell stuff like bread, tortilla, or fruits and that's how they make money.

T: So, they make living out of those small businesses.

M: Yes

T: That must be really tough.

M: Yea, safety too, and education. We only have three schools from 1st grade to 9th grade. After 9th grade, you have to move to another school. If you want to do that, you'll have to travel on buses. You have to pay for the tickets every day to go there. The government does not provide any MetroCard or provide any help. So, it's hard to see people going to school. It's like high school. Not a lot of kids get to go to high school because they don't have any money.

T: That's hard to afford.

M: Their family does not have a lot of resources to help them.

T: Let's say you can't afford to go to school what do you do then? Do you just stay home?

M: If it's a boy they usually work as farmer some girls also do that. A lot of girls just get married.

T: At a young age?

M: Yes, like at 12, 13 they don't want to get married just find a partner I guess. Then, they live together that's how it repeats it's the same story repeated itself in families they are not looking toward the future. They don't have dreams. Maybe they do have dreams but they can not accomplish their dreams. The only solution they find is to get out of their house because most of the time they get abused in their house.

T: This is a really hard situation.

T: So why did you leave your home country?

M: Well, a lot of people know that El Salvador is one of the countries that is affected by the gang. My dream was not to come to the United States. I never dream of coming here. I just wanted to go to school and finish my education and help my family. But, I did not have the dream to come to this country to work here and whatever. But, then I had a problem with a gang member in El Salvador because I didn't want to be with him. In El Salvador, they going to ask you it sounds crazy but it's true and a lot of people don't believe this. But, the gang member will want if you're a girl you're more likely to get in a relationship with them because if you get in a relationship with a gang member they can protect you. That's what they tell you and then even if you don't want to be in a relationship with them, you don't have any choice. It's either you join the gang and have a relationship with them or they kill your family.

T: Wowww!

M: You don't have a choice and that's what happened to me. So, I had to come here. It was just not my dream.

T: Oh, I am so sorry to hear that.

M: Yeah, me too and thank you.

T: What did you miss the most about El Salvador?

M: You know I miss my family that's the only thing I miss. I don't want them to be with people over there because all the people I know my friends most of them are just bad, they join gangs or families are part of the gang member. So I don't miss these people because I know they don't look toward the future. What I miss the most is my family, siblings, mom, and dad. We are eight kids in total and mom and dad. I miss my siblings and dad. Because I never wanted to be away from them. I just had to leave without saying goodbye and my siblings too back home in El Salvador thinking that my sister and I will come back. We both know that we were not coming back. It was just sad.

T: So your siblings and dad are still in El Salvador?

M: Yea but they moved from the village we used to live in.

T: Oh they moved from the village?

M: Yea

T: Oh that's great

M: We couldn't live there anymore.

T: Yea because of the situation after everything you said, it's hard to live in that condition.

M: Yea!

T: What did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving for the United States?

M: So, things happened quickly. I didn't even get the chance to tell my friend. I mean, I didn't have any choice I couldn't tell them since I scaping from my country I couldn't say goodbye or anything. I came here like many other central Americans. I came here illegally I crossed the border when I was 15. I remember the day I left everything that happened was in a week. In a week my family sends the money to pay the person who was going to bring us to the border. I stopped going to school, they locked us down my family locked us down. The morning we left it was like 4 am. The car came to the house and then we just left. We didn't say bye we didn't even hug mom. She just said bye through the window, dad, and siblings were sleeping.

T: So did it happened in the night time because you said 4 am?

M: 4 am yes.

T: so like if somebody sees you guys leaving would that cause a problem?

M: Yes, that's why we left at that time because the goal was that nobody has to know where we're going, what we're going to do, and why are we're leaving?

T: Yes, it's similar to my country when I was coming, mine was not at night time and my family knew I was coming here. Thank you for sharing.

M: Yes

T: What were your expectations of the United States?

M: I will say before I didn't want to come here. However, when I knew I am already on the way to go to the United States, I am like I hope they let me in. I was praying for that. Once I am in I do hope everything will work and I can get a job so I can help my family. I didn't really have an expectation you see how now I am a student I got to college and I work and everything. I didn't though I was going to make it to college.

T: So what you were worried about was actually to be in America first?

M: Yes!

T: Oh that makes sense because that's the hardest part.

M: Yes!

T: How did New York City meet, and fail to meet your expectations?

M: Well, when we crossed the border to meet my uncle, they took us to another place called Casa Olga it's like a shelter. Over there was more girl who was coming from Central America. They gave us a chance to call my uncle. Then we called my uncle for ten minutes and then he told us what New York looks like, and what the Bronx looks like and everything. That's when we started having expectations because he said I am going to be able to go to school to a high school. I was like you know I was expecting these high schools as they portray them in the movies with lockers and everything cool. But, in my high school, they didn't even have lockers but it was still fun. The house I was expecting like not a lot of building because he told us we have a big apartment blah blah blah. When we came here I didn't like the building it looks poor and I don't want to live there.

T: Where you wanted to live and like what kinds of a house?

M: I wanted to live in a big place because when he told us about the house maybe for him it was big because it was only him and my aunt. Then, it was me and my sister. The apartment was kind small and the more people the smaller.

T: Yeah, that's right because there is less space now.

M: Yes!

T: Walk me through your journey to NYC did everything went according to plan?

M: Yes, we didn't really have a plan but we made it to America.

T: Yes, which is the most important.

M: Then we made to my uncle's house. After that, we had a plan but before that, the only goal was to make it to America and come to my uncle's house.

T: When you were coming to NYC with whom did you come with?

M: I came with my sister she was younger than me. I was 15 and she was 14.

T: How were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood or in the United States in general?

T: Like when you came to your neighborhood how did people receive you? Did you feel like you belong there did you had that sense?

M: That is a really good question because when I came here you see how New York I feel like you don't really get to interact with your neighbors because I just came here we got in the build than our apartment that's it. We didn't really go outside and then when I started school is when I started meeting people. But, they were just weird and different.

T: Were people open to you?

M: People in high school were cool, nice, and curious they want to know about my country. There were a lot of Dominicans and they don't really know my accent and some of the words I said. They look at me if I am something to study or learn from me.

T: So, they were interested in learning more about you and where you're from?

T: How did you adjust the new language or the culture of NYC?

M: It was really hard because I remember I used to cry because I didn't know how to speak English. It took me a year to learn to speak English because I could understand a little bit however, I was afraid to speak it. A year later I remember going to 10th grade, I started feeling more comfortable.

T: Comfortable and familiar with the language.

M: Yes.

T: What about the culture wise because I know where you're from and here is completely different systems and culture. So, I was wondering how did you adapt to that new culture?

M: I didn't really adopt it. I wouldn't say I adopted a new culture. I still try to but they are different from us and it's kind of hard to understand them sometimes. I feel like New York is multicultural. If you see New Yorkers on the street they don't care. It's like they don't care they would just do whatever they want. They would dress however they want, say whatever they want. For example, in El Salvador, we have this culture thing whenever you pass by somebody you'll say "hi good morning" even if you don't know the person.

T: That's something in my country no matter the person either is your neighbor or not you will always have to greet them. But here, I could even pass by my neighbor without looking at each other eyes. We don't even know each other name and we live right next to each other.

M: Yea like you don't even know each other.

T: It's different here a lot of people just like to be in their own corner. Where we are from it's different because people are all one and together.

T: What new opportunity was available to you upon your arrival in New York?

M: Education would be the most important one to me. Also, I got the opportunity to get a free lawyer to continue my immigration process. I have a comfortable house and family. When I came here I didn't have to worry about working I had to focus on my schooling.

T: Still you work today right?

M: Yes, and I also feel safe.

T: I feel like safety is really important because as you mentioned when you were in your home country, being a girl you're most likely to be mixed up with the gang just to be safe. But, here you don't have to do that and I am glad that you're safe really.

M: Thank God I am, I am safe here. I am still here and I don't know if I will still be alive if I was in my country.

T: Because there are a lot of disasters. I just discovered that El Salvador has a frequent earthquake and volcano activity and stuffs. So, I really can't imagine how hard that will be to survive.

M: Yes!

T: Were any opportunities denied to you because you were an immigrant?

M: Um I don't really remember but I remember a time when I was in high school I was selected to go on a trip. It's like a week trip to Washington D.C. There were few students selected for the trip and I was one of them. But, I got scared because it was the time when Donald Trump got elected as President and everybody was scared. As you know, I didn't have any documentation. Therefore, spoke to my teachers that I couldn't go because I don't have papers at the moment. They were willing to help me if it was the financial issues. They said, "you can still come but it's on your own will." Then, I decided not to go. The opportunity was not denied to me, I decided not to go there.

T: You do not want to take any risks because at that time there were a lot of deportations as we.

M: Yes that's why

T: What did the assimilation project look like for you? In another world how does feting in look like to you? Do you understand the question?

M: Not really.

T: where you live right now do you feel like you belong if yes how does it look like, how do you know you belong here?

M: Now at the moment I do feel like I belong to this place. I also ask myself why I belong to this place? But, I feel like after a start working, graduated from high school, and this is my first year in college I just discovered more about New York City and I just realized that over here everybody can be themselves. I don't really have to fit in because I can be the person I was and nobody is going to judge me.

T: That's true but, it depends because some immigrants like us we often face these situations.

M: Yea but I don't go to Church or follow anything from my culture so, for me, I feel like it's easier. To adapt to a new culture.

T: That would be completely different for me because being a Muslim and an African living in this country that's a lot to take in every day.

T: Where have you live in New York City and why?

M: I am living in the Bronx. The first reason I could say I live in the Bronx is that my uncle lives there and I also know he lives here because the rent is cheaper than some other places in New York.

T: So for economic reasons.

M: Yes.

T: What was the hardest part of your move to New York City?

M: The language and my family.

T: Why were those consider to be the hardest part for you?

M: Because even though I know there is a lot of people here who speak Spanish but I know English the most important language in America. It took me really long to learn the English language and at some point, I felt like I was never going to speak English.

T: I know you speak both Spanish and English so, has that change your life here in New York City being bilingual? Has it opened any opportunity?

M: Well, it does because at my job we have a lot of customers and they speak Spanish most of the time. At my job site, there is no one else who speaks Spanish so they always say " Maria come translate." Even though it gets annoying sometimes but it's something that I can offer to my community being bilingual.

T: What's your favorite part about living in New York?

M: My favorite part about living in New York is the city.

T: The city! Tell me about it.

M: Because I work overnight and sometimes I just don't feel like going home and I stay in places where I can think when I don't want to be in my house and that is the city. I just enjoy seeing the light and seeing people taking pictures. I enjoy observing them. It makes me curious about what their dreams are because you see all these stories in Times Sq. There is a lot of people that travel here just to see New York City just to know NYC and take pictures of the city. At least here I mean I don't live in the city but I work in the city and I am already tired of the light and everything. But, this is something new for them and I feel like why we should appreciate it because that's something we have and we can go there whenever we want. But, there is a lot of people who want to come here to take pictures.

T: How has your neighbor changed since your arrival?

M: I don't really remember how it was before when I first came here. To me, it looks the same. There is only one bodega that recently changed it used to look like an old-style bodega. Now it had a lot of glasses, they sell food to go and to stay. It's more like bodega and restaurant that's the only thing that has changed.

T: What would you change about the current U.S. immigration system?

M: You know that is something that makes me think a lot because as I came here with my sister since we crossed the border they never separated us we're always together. I was even scared to be separated from her because there is a lot of kids some of them are crying and they don't give you good food. But, what else can you expect? I will change the policy of separation of the family.

T: Yes definitely!

M: Because I went through this and even if it was only my sister and I. I still didn't want us to be separated because I heard stories from people that some of the parents are in Texas and then the kids are in New York. They are far away from each other. The kids don't have any idea what's going on. That's a trauma for them because my sister and I, we had trauma with that place. We know we had each other we used to hug each other whenever we feel sad or when they were taking kids since every hour they will take twenty kids. Let's say you close your eyes or you're going to sleep they put you in cages and when you wake up the kids that were next to you, will no longer be there because there will be new kids. So, there is a lot of people coming in and out and that's why my sister and I always sleep together. We used to switch. For instance, when my sister is asleep, I will stay awake and watch over her and when it's my turn she will do the same thing.

T: like observing each other

M: Yes

T: I really agree about what you would like to change because honestly if you see these parents leaving their home country trying to come to America is for a better future and provide for their family. So, what's the reason for them coming if their kids away will be taken away from them. It's like I will rather stay and faced all the issues in my country than taking my kids away from me. The children are the reason actually why many family migrate. They want to provide a better future for their kids. The immigration system I also believe that it really needs to be changed maybe if they know a lot of our stories that could make a change.

M: Yes exactly. I think they do know the stories they just don't care.

T: That's true.

M: I mean that's what I think.

T: How has the politics of the last decades impacted your experience as an immigrant in the United States?

M: I don't really follow politics but I was granted an asylum 2015. I know it's always been hard to be granted asylum but now I know they are not granting asylums anymore. They are not even accepting a request. So, I feel like that was something that benefited me since I could do it before. On the other hand, I don't know about people who are doing it now. I don't know what their experiences are going to be. But, my experience with immigration and all those kinds of stuff. I can't say anything bad about it because it was good. Thank God I now go to college, I have a job and that's it.

T: That's good because now you're able to provide for yourself and actually help your family. You're an independent woman now.

M: Yes

T: As an immigrant do you ever feel like you have to hide who you are?

M: Not really because in New York there is a lot of immigrants. I do feel like my immigration story should not be shared not like it should not be share I just feel like people will not understand the reason why I migrated. Why I came here illegally. Like people said why couldn't you apply for a visa then come here. My situation was different I had to escape from my country I had no choice. That's the only reason I don't really share my immigration story with people.

T: I know it's hard

T: How does your family negotiate to live a mixed family household? Because I know you said you live with your uncle. How do you negotiate to live together?

M: What do you mean by negotiating?

T: So it's you your aunt, uncle and sibling right? So, how does it feel like living with them? I know they're family but still, you can feel the difference. How do you manage that?

M: Yea it's a little hard because you know there is a lot of miss-communication and I really don't spend a lot of time at my house. I am mostly at work or at school. I only go there to sleep and eat at night time. Then, the next day I just go to my same routine as an everyday go school, then go to work,. But, sometimes it gets hard because I don't really spend time with them. However, whenever they got a chance to talk to me they are like " my uncle did this, my uncle did that. They have a lot of problems but I don't experience that.

T: Why did you come to the U.S. instead of another country?

M: Because I don't have family in any other country. My family is here I mean my uncle is my mom's family and they said they were going to pay a guy to bring us here. So, they didn't really give us a choice. I couldn't say oh I want to go to Europe, Mexico or China. They just told me you're coming here in a week so get your things together.

T: Let's say for example you migrated to another country do you think the opportunities you have here in America you will have it in another country?

M: I think it depends on the country because I heard from one of my friends she went to another country and she applied for asylum. Actually her experience is even better because her family, her whole family had to leave the country. They had to go to another country but they had family over there. But, they had to apply for asylum over there and once they got there, the government provide them a house, a job, cloth, and everything. Like welcoming them.

T: Wow that's great. I mean you have not received that way in America.

M: No I was not. Even a guy who used to take care of us in Casa Hogar in Texas he once told us " you guys are not welcome here" he said, " you guys are immigrant and you crossed the border illegally and you guys are not welcome here."

T: How does that make you feel?

M: Well, we were crying because he was giving us a speech. He was on our side he was like understanding us. However, in the end, he was like you guys are not welcome here so don't expect people to treat you as you were born here because you guys are not from here.

T: People are just heartless sometimes. How could you say such a thing just because at the end of the day you yourself you are an immigrant. Somehow from your past, somebody migrated here which makes you an immigrant too.

M: He referred to the term illegal because he knew we crossed the border illegally. So, I think that's why he said it.

T: That really hurt I wouldn't like it if anybody tells me that. It's like you would not know how to respond since it's true.

M: And we didn't know anything we were new we haven't see our family. Most of us don't know the people who you are going to end up with. For instance, I did not know my uncle did not know my mom's family. When we came here I just put them on the phone I don't know him because I did not have a picture of him. So, it was still hard for me.

T: I am so sorry.

T: How does your family remain connected or how do you try to reunite because your dad and siblings are still in El Salvador. how do you remain connected?

M: I don't really talk to my family in El Salvador because you know I don't have time if I am not at school I am at work. My mom also came here the same way my sister and I came here. She's right now in the process hopefully her process goes well. She was living in Chicago at first but then she came here. I feel like New York provides a lot of help for immigrants and they're helping her. Hopefully, they grant her asylum then she's going to be able to bring my siblings. We are not together yet.

T: Sorry! I know you provide for your family back home how do you help them?

M: Every day I go to school I also work. I work 35 to 40 hours a week.

T: Wow that's a lot

M: Yea I don't even know how I make to the weekend. I try to help them as much as I can. I know it's not enough but then I can not do more than that and I know they understand me. I also have to pay rent and bills. So, I have to make money to pay for everything here and still have send money to make sure they have food for the rest of the week or month. If they want to go to the doctor they will call me " oh I need to go to the doctor". Therefore, I have to send money. That's why it's really hard for me to save money because all my money goes to rent, bill, or to my family in El Salvador.

T: I mean you have a lot of responsibility going on over here. You provide here and El Salvador. It's too much. You got it. May God will make everything easy for you.

M: Yea

T: Well, that was the last question of our interview Maria. I really enjoyed talking to you learning more about you and where you are from. I hope everything goes well. I wish you all the best. Thank you so much for your time.

M: Thank you for picking me for the interview.

T: Of course te quiero bye.

M: Yo tambien te quiero bye