

The Borderlands



Before moving to Mexico City, I lived in Silver Lake, the Los Angeles neighborhood where I grew up and which today is a curious mix of gays, Mexicans, Asians of various nationalities, young white yuppie families and the Twentysomething crowd that is pierced, tatoed, bisexual, and generally infatuated with anything exotic, primitive, or both. If I feel at home anywhere, it's probably there.

But I also find that I feel at home in Mexico City, so perfectly described by master photographer Pablo Ortíz Monasterio as La

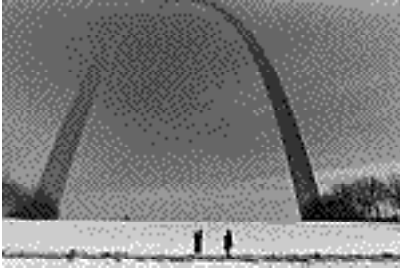
última ciudad, The Last City, where I live in what is akin to the Silver Lake district of the biggest urban conglomeration on earth, on Avenida Veracruz in Colonia Condesa, which is home to a curious mix of gays, Jews and other assorted light-skinned Mexicans, young yuppie couples, and the Twentysomething crowd that is pierced, tattooed, bisexual and generally infatuated with anything primitive, exotic, or both (to the list I must also add that, on the weekends, because I live within walking distance of three of Mexico City's most beautiful parks, there cruises along Veracruz a crowd of young, poor, mostly Indian families—grandparents, mom and dad, seven kids to a brood—and bands of equally poor, mostly Indian teenagers in various stages of rebellion (heavy metal, post-punk, late hippie, etc.).

It is in such places that I feel at home and there are many such places in the borderlands these days. And by "borderlands," I mean the region within which I have travelled for the last year and a half: the better part of the United States and Mexico, as far south as Chiapas and as far north as Wisconsin.



The book that I am writing is about Indians, Pentecostals, Sexual Outlaws of various proclivities, Street Kids, Witches and other assorted Rebels. I am not really any of these things, though I've hung around people like this long enough to know that I prefer their company over yuppie couples and that this says something about who I am. These people, all of them, in the broadest sense, are migrants: they have packed up and left one home for another—physically, sexually, politically, culturally, spiritually—or are still in transit.

People who migrate often develop a multiple, syncretic consciousness, and as such often have very dynamic personalities; they are capable of great, and sometimes terrible, things. The "natives" in the United States dwell on the negative; they see the migrants in their midst as usurpers at best ("they're stealing our jobs!") or, at worst, as just plain criminal types. And indeed, they are illegals, or outlaws—they have, after all, broken various legal and moral codes, at least those put in place by the "legal" culture. To me they are outlaws in the heroic sense, since the laws they have broken are, in my opinion, hypocritical and corrupt to the core.



I write about them because I want you, wherever and whoever you are, whatever your opinion about "illegals" is, to meet these people. I believe they have something to say to all of us. They rarely have a voice in our media, in our political or cultural debates. This seems very strange to me, because they have been, for some time now, at the very center of our political and cultural debates. Yes, the debates rage, in Mexico and the United States, about the "migrants" I write about. I do not claim to own a "truth" about the political nature of the

argument. And I do not propose that this project to serve as a rallying point for any particular political program, other than, of course, the immediate dismantling of all borders, everywhere.



More than anything, I want to write about a culture that is evolving, one that transcends the demarcations of border patrols and free trade zones (and that has arisen, in part, because of them). A culture that deposits the music and the legend of the late, great rapper Tupac Shakur in the Indian highlands of Michoacán, and Indian festivals from the highlands of Michoacán on the Main Streets of small towns in the Upper Midwest; a culture that sends Catholics tumbling into spiritual tribes that speak in tongues and causes

"straight" American men to lust after Mexican transvestites, a culture that breaks down the old black-white structure of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and bodes the end of the PRI's stranglehold on Mexican politics, a culture that globalizes the best and the worst of all our desires and ways of seeing the world.

I write, then, of the borderlands, of life and death in the borderlands. And this border, or, if you will, post-border culture, is much more than a regional phenomenon. More than a geographical region, I write of a cultural space created by forces that are not unique to this region, but part of a much larger, indeed global, evolution.



Perhaps what we are seeing is, in the context of the history of the Americas, merely the ongoing process of mestizaje, which originally described the mingling of European and Indian blood and culture that created the mixed people (mestizos) that are the majority in Latin America today. Mestizaje, unlike the U.S. assimilationist term "melting pot," allows for the Indian influence to serve not as a historical footnote but as an enduring, ever-evolving legacy.

Likewise, it allows for new influences to be adopted continuously without really jeopardizing the historical root. Mestizaje is a journey that has no end; it is the cultural version of perpetual motion not in theory but in practice.



"Mexicans can't forget; Americans never remember," the adage goes, and it does capture something of a cultural truth in terms of the way things are perceived from one side of the border or the other. But mestizaje allows for an intermediate space where the future does not necessarily annihilate the past, where both commingle in the present. I walk out of my apartment in Mexico City and hear the ubiquitous street musicians play songs from the days of the Revolution; I turn the corner and at the video arcade Indian-looking kids are drop-kicking bad guys, Ninja-style. In the highlands of Michoacán, a satellite dish trained at the heavens receives *The X-Files*, but Indian fiestas are still celebrated much the way they were before the arrival of the Conquistadores.

As north and south come together in one huge borderland, traditions clash and meld. The north offers its optimism, something the south desperately needs; the south, in turn, offers a new way of looking at the way cultures develop. Mestizaje, I believe, is much closer to the experience of the United States than the "melting pot" or the more contemporary, politically correct (and slightly nationalist) idea of cultures in the United States approximating a "chunky stew."



Americans (of all races and ethnicities), though they often want to deny it, are becoming mestizos, too. Walk into the bedrooms of the youngest Americans (black or white or yellow or brown, working-, middle- or upper-class), and listen to what they listen to on their CD players. You will hear the strains of a band called Sublime, whose late lead singer, Bradley Nowell, sang songs peppered with Spanish and set to a reggae beat (Nowell was a tow-headed surfer type from Long Beach, California). Or you will hear the "artist formerly known as Prince" performing a salsa jam as hot as anything out of the Lower East Side on a Monday night. Or you'll meet an iconoclastic pop genius named Beck, who titled a recent album *Odelay*, which, he tells us, is the way an Anglo kid like him—who just happened to have a Mexican step—dad from Chihuahua—pronounces the Mexican colloquial affirmation, "¡Orale!"



Now the people of the United States have always thought of themselves, and been thought of abroad, by admirers and enemies alike, as a people on-the-move. For two centuries, Americans moved across the land from east to west with their Manifest Destiny dreams, taming successive frontiers. Of course, many of those who today call themselves Americans have, throughout the history of the nation, found themselves in situations similar to today's migrants: fleeing religious persecution, civil war, poverty, slavery. (Americans also had the luxury, of course, of traipsing over the globe not as exiles but as wielders of the Big Stick—Mexico, for example was invaded three times by the gringo. The United States: an empire equal parts good and evil, to be

loved, hated and grudgingly respected, as any empire must be.)

Mexicans, however, were never thought of, from the perspective of the north, as a people on-the-move, but rather as a people stuck-in-time, alternately seen as primitive, mystical and docile (the stereotypical Indian) or as the representatives of the Old World in the New (the legacy of European Colonialism and the adoption of its style by the Mexican elites). But from the time of the Revolution on, to greater and lesser degrees, Mexicans have been a people on-the-move.



Some of us were travellers long before the meeting of the Old and New Worlds: the nomadic tribes of Amerindia. In Cherán, which is nestled in a rugged highland area populated by the Purépecha people, notions of migration are an essential part of the regional identity. Their very name means "a people who travel." There is conjecture in some anthropological circles that the Purépechas are related to the Incans of Perú; the dialects of both peoples have key similarities. Perhaps some Incan bikers decided to roam o'er the continent thousands of years ago, arrived in Michoacán and were enchanted by its rich volcanic earth, the stunning lake at Pátzcuaro, the swarms of monarch butterflies floating in the temperate breezes.

If this is true, then it would be no coincidence that the Purépechas of today are famous all over Mexico and the United States for their tenacity as Wetbacks; they've been migrating northward, to Pennsylvania and Illinois, to Arkansas and Kansas and California, since the early part of the century.



So then, to be American (north and south) is to move. To run away, to run towards, forever leaving, forever arriving, forever trying to return. One of the primordial myths of the Mexica people (popularly known as the Aztecs), is the story of how they left their original home in search of a new paradise, Aztlán, which they never found. After the Conquest, the Spaniards picked up on tales of other paradises, like the Seven Cities of Cibola, whose streets were supposedly paved with gold, and said to exist somewhere in the region of what today is the Southwestern United States. Grand Spanish expeditions searched fruitlessly for the gold, instead finding important overland trade routes.



Today, for the descendants of the Mexicas, Aztlán is California. The Seven Cities of Cibola are places like Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, New York, San Francisco, Phoenix, St. Louis. Paradise does not die easily.

The elemental irony of the debate over immigration in the United States is, of course, that the "Americans," whose own origins are a classic migrant story, are now the ones telling the Other Americans, the Mexicans, to stop moving.

They will not stop moving.