

Cowboys and Indians



Today, migration from Mexico to the U.S., legal and not, is at an all-time high. Much of it is circular, and rapid: migrants work seasonal stints and return to transform their homeland with habits picked up in the north. And, in a phenomenon that has made the notion of "Chicano," with its binary and mostly negative view of American history (brown and white in constant battle) practically quaint, Mexican migration has expanded out from the traditional Mexican-American centers of the Southwest, where most of the great Mexican barrios existed without a significant amount of intimate contact with other ethnic or racial groups, to the black and Asian inner cities and, in a historically new and unique situation, even to formerly all white-black (and poor) areas of middle and southeastern U.S.

For me, these changes are self-evident, but on the nightly news in the United States, the white-black focus is still omnipresent, and the interaction of the "natives" with the "migrants" is reduced to a pithy debate on the merits or evils of "immigration."



And little is said about the fact that migration is a two-way affair. Today, because satellite dishes are ubiquitous in both the First and "developing" world, access to MTV and CNN (which recently began airing a 24-hour Spanish-language edition) is universal. We all dance to a World Beat. And, although it might be more difficult to apprehend at first, the Mexican migrant presence in the U.S. is having its influence on the "native" culture. Urban theorists speak of how the public space of various major cities of the Los Angeles variety (extended, centerless, without a great amount of street life) is renegotiated. Street vendors tropicalize the sidewalks with stands of fruit and pirated cassettes of salsa, merengue and cumbia. The Virgen of Guadalupe begins appearing on the streets of formerly WASP cities. And in a sign that the interaction is moving past the superficial (like the ubiquitous Taco Bell's and Burrito Brothers' eateries across the U.S.), inter-ethnic marriage is rapidly increasing (in California, some 30 percent of young couples are mixed racially or ethnically). These are clear signs of a migrant mestizaje occurring in the cities of the U.S. Latino immigrant kids living in the formerly majority-black inner city adopt Hip Hop style and, in turn, offer a tropical aesthetic to the American blacks. On the east coast, one of the latest dance crazes is called "Merengue-House"



Once again, to me this process is self-evident and, increasingly, prevalent in both major urban centers and rural areas in the United States. And yet, it is a popular culture virtually invisible to the mainstream.



I have spent the best part of the last year documenting the connections between Cherán, Michoacán and cities and towns scattered throughout the United States, and can tell you that neither Proposition 187 nor the landmark restrictionist Immigration Reform of 1996 have slowed the process of integration. What these measures have done is make the proposition of integration an increasingly life or death proposition.



In the last few years, Washington has not only paid lip service, as it has over the decades, to "holding the line" at the southern border; it has now allocated billions of dollars in new funding for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Border Patrol to step up its interdiction efforts. The numbers of "illegals" detained increases dramatically, and so do the risks in crossing. According to a University of Houston report, some 3,000 migrants have died trying in the last decade, numbers that sound like the death toll from

a low-intensity war. Most of the deaths result from drownings in the Río Grande or from dehydration when migrants get lost during the summer months in the torrid heat of the Southwest frontier.

The Border Patrol came up with a slogan a couple of years ago in its campaign to deter would-be illegals from crossing the border into the United States from Mexico: "Stay Out, Stay Alive." It was the BP publicist's equivalent of hanging the bodies of the dead on the border fence. But what most people I've met on the migrant trail have learned is the opposite: To Stay Put these days is To Die, and to Move is to Live.



The "illegals" have indeed violated national boundaries. Having done so is precisely what has insured their survival—economically as well as culturally. In the U.S. media, Mexico looms large, and it is not a pretty picture. For the most part, it looks like America loathes Mexico these days. So much so that it reveals just how much of its loathing is actually desire. Yes, Americans must admit it: so much repulsion can only mean ravenous desire. You see, Americans want Mexico, but on their terms. They want the goodies—Free Trade discounts, plus the usual touristy perks like lusty señoritas, dark beer, powder-sanded tropical beaches. But they also fear that the alien will change them in the process—and then they would no longer be "Americans," would they? (Gringos lament the rise of nationalism all over the world, never realizing that they too suffer a good dose of it.)



But the Mexican Indian is already in the American Heartland. And America, via its pop, is irrevocably encrusted in the imagination of the Indian Country down south. There is no serious discussion of withdrawing from the North American Free Trade Agreement, mostly because no one in the United States can point exactly to what drastic negatives have resulted from it. (On the Mexican side, the discussion is much more poignant: massive out-migration can be linked these days to rural areas where subsistence farmers have gone under precisely because of the economic reforms Mexico had to undertake to make the deal palatable to the Americans.)



The Mexican economic crisis notwithstanding, migrant optimism dies hard in the south: if anything, the crisis mindset makes Mexicans cling to hope all the more—it is all they have. Moreover, logic dictates that Mexicans continue moving north because there are indeed wide-open job markets in all manner of industries, from agriculture and light manufacturing to the massive American service sector (restaurants, hotels, etc.) The Mexicans will not be denied optimism in their darkest hour.

And so a curious thing has happened to the Americans and the Mexicans, to the Cowboys and the Indians. Cowboys were once the optimists, Indians the fatalists. But who is on the move now? Who is acting defensively, who dreams of scaling the social and economic ladder, who harbors paranoid fantasies, who passes Prop. 187, who passes a double-nationality law?



Take a stroll down Broadway in downtown Los Angeles, and what do you see? Cowboys, I mean Indians dressed like cowboys: Stetsons, jeans, snakeskin boots. (Meanwhile, curiously, it has been popular in the last few years for the "white man" to seek the Great Spirit in "redskin" sweat lodges.) Are the Indians dressing in Cowboy drag? The Indian rides the Cowboy's horse: in Greyhound stations across the land, Mexicans wait for buses whose placards read St. Louis, Chicago, Raleigh, Houston. So if They've Become

Us, then Who are We?

All our backs are wet . . .