

The New Americans



In the U.S., the Indians from Cherán are, by and large, inhabiting not some marginalized space on the other side of the tracks, not some new Mexican shantytown segregated from the larger society but living alongside the "natives": poor blacks, whites and Asians. They are being transformed by the experience and are likewise transforming towns across the heartland.



A couple more "postcards" from the places we've been: Norwalk, Wisconsin: a town of five hundred, half of whom are employed at the local meat-packing plant, most of these Mexicans, many from Cherán. The migrant boys have taken a liking to the local white girls "the daughters of Mennonites, Amish, Plain Christians" and vice-versa. The lovers speak only broken English and broken Spanish. But the law of desire speaks its own language and we're always going to desire the Other: there are a few dozen babies in town now, sandy-haired, green-eyed, golden-skinned, a new Cosmic race. The Indians hold traditional dances on Main Street. The white girls blast norteña music from their car stereos, the Mexican boys walk around with heavy metal buzzing in their Walkman headphones. But not all is peaceful here; down at the bar "there are only two bars in Norwalk, and one

restaurant" the brown boys and white boys (usually over jealousy and sometimes over issues of employment) shoot 'em up like the Old West. Norwalk hasn't had this much action since the Indian Wars.



Dallas, Texas: just south of Dealey Plaza, the ghetto: at an intersection in the shadow of an I-35 overpass, a liquor store for poor whites, poor blacks, and poor Mexicans. The Mexicans work the store, serve the whites and blacks. A white dude straight out of the pen tells us he hates the niggers. The Mexicans say they're discriminated against by the whites. A couple of black hip-hop teens tell us that there's no problem between Mexicans and blacks, but that both do have a problem, however, with the whites. In cities

across America, in liquor store parking lots, along the industrial boulevards, within walking distance of the gleaming redevelopment towers downtown, there is this new, multihued dynamic occurring, that is two parts class and one part race. It is the ground zero of urban conflict for the new century, and it is far more complex than the black-white paradigm that our media and politicians still prefer as our racial truth.



Benson, North Carolina: a Mexican grocery store that sells tortillas and chiles and rents Mexican B-movies to the tobacco pickers, who, on average of about once a week, come down from their work camps "whose conditions are reminiscent of FSA photographs" and stock up on goods. At a MacDonal'd's a few blocks away, they are giving away Los Tres Caballeros dolls to Mexican and gringo customers alike. Captain Roger Crouch of the Benson PD says,

"Well, them Meskins ahrrr ah-write. Once in a why-al they'll be gettin' drunk as a skunk and weeel haul 'em in, ya know. Now, I don't speak no Meskin, and them boys sure as hell don't speak no American..." A bewildering thing, this Mexican presence in the South.



So where have we been on this journey? Up and down the borderlands, from Wisconsin to Michoacán, from California to North Carolina, with frequent, very frequent stops in Los Angeles and Mexico City...



In the last few years I've flown the L.A.-Mexico City route perhaps 50 times—I know every nautical mile, each and every valley and snow-capped volcano and alluvial fan and duned desert and sand bar beneath blue-green sea, have seen each detail of the landscape from 33,000 feet. And I know the exact moment when we cross the border, because I always listen to the cockpit conversations on Channel 8 of my headphones and when the controllers order the pilots to lock their guidance equipment on the radar beacon at

Julian (a small town in the mountains east of San Diego) that is the sign that we are crossing from Mexican into American airspace, but, you know what? There is nothing down there. There is no line, there is no wall (the new 9-foot fence that begins running eastward from Tijuana only goes a dozen miles), there is only semi-arid land, very sparsely populated, and the beginning of a great desert to the east, a desert that lasts for two thousand miles until you get to the Gulf Coast. I've been saying it for years: there is no border; it is much more of an idea than a reality. What does exist are the dangers of the road.



I write from a place in the desert, the Mojave, the very one those United Airlines jets fly over on their approach to Los Angeles International Airport, carrying free trade business-types and, increasingly, working-class migrants (it's a curious thing to see a guy in a double-breasted suit sitting next to one wearing a sweat-stained cowboy hat and faded plaid shirt). This morning I drove up into Joshua Tree National Park, perhaps the most strangely beautiful part of the Mojave, and chose a spot far away from the

German and Japanese tourists and those immensely irritating middle-class American families, to a spot not where the Joshua trees reach this way and that with their yearning arms, no, to a more arid place, closer to the Colorado Desert, which is drabber and lonelier and I guess most people think that it's not as pretty as the landscape at the higher elevations, because very few people go there.



That's why I went. I went there to climb a mountain and look around at a place without roads or checkpoints, and to think about all the places and people I've left behind and all the places and people I have yet to see, about all our journeys, each and every journey of necessity, each and every road taken.

Someday soon, I will depart again.

19 November, 1997

Twentynine Palms, California