

Perpetual Motion



We are on the road. Perpetually. Always arriving. Constantly departing. Many destinations and just as many points-of-origin. We. All of us. All of us mojudos—all our backs wet, all Wetbacks, bathed in the waters of a river where our dreams and bodies and pasts may drown, or where we may be resurrected, our past connected with our future. All of us—"legals" and "illegals," Mexicans and Chicanos, Gentiles and Jews, white-black-yellow-brown, working-mid-upper class. For we live in the Age of Migration. And whether you, reader and viewer, have actually physically moved or not doesn't really matter.



Though many of us have. Perhaps you're part of the white middle class that fled the central city for the suburbs and then escaped the suburb-turned-inner-city for the big skies of Montana? Maybe you're an African-American kid whose family goes back three generations in an old northern industrial city and your neighborhood became a warzone and now your mom thinks you'd be better off with your aunt in Louisiana? Or a member of the Salvadoran family that came up to Los Angeles during the war, dad swearing he'd return home as soon as the death squads died, but how to return now, after 15 years of life in the USA, with children who speak better English than Spanish and a good steady job and a house in the San Fernando Valley? Or are you a native of Michoacán headed back to your ancestral home after yet another season in the picking fields of the American heartland?

Even if you haven't been sent packing by the new economic orders or civil war or urban warfare, you've still moved; the world comes to you. You watch CNN and are instantaneously transported to whichever spot of the globe is hot today, or you travel o'er the globe via the Internet. You spin the radio dial and end up in India on that World Beat station. You eat cuisine from Thailand and Morrocco and Argentina at restaurants where the cooks and busboys are inevitably Mexican. You catch a ride in a taxi driven by a Pakistani. You buy a sweater at a street stand presided over by a Nigerian.



the sexual border at will; Ellen personifies the gay lifestyle once a week on primetime network television.

It doesn't matter where you are, who you were, who you might have been in some other era before the world started to collapse in on itself (there have been other times when culture and commerce moved fiercely across frontiers, but never on a completely global scale). So you're a white teenager in the suburbs? You are culturally connected to the black inner city through Hip Hop. You were once Catholic, now you're a Promise Keeper or a Pentecostal. And even if you're just a plain old fashioned "straight," you can vicariously cross



they can legislate against the force of global economics and culture.

The New Americans will not take you to all these cultural spaces, but it will take you on a journey through one important slice of the migratory swirl. Joseph Rodríguez and I, for the last year and a half, have been following migrants from Mexico—most of them Cherán, Michoacán—as they shuttle back and forth between their homeland and their new homes in the United States. We are not interested in whether these people have "papers" or not; some do, some don't. Let the politicians debate immigration policy—they who think that



migrant population that in recent years has fanned out across the country, from the largest cities on the coasts to the smallest of "heartland" towns.

We have christened this project The New Americans because we believe that the migrants are telling the "natives" who they are becoming, and because, from our vantage point, the migrants—the New Americans—embody everything that is American, in the broad, continental sense of the word. In truth, the title owes everything to Joseph Rodríguez, an extraordinarily faithful and inspiring friend and magnificent documentary photographer, with whom I undertook a trip across the U.S. looking for migrant stories among a Mexican

Earlier this year, in North Carolina, on a night after a grueling 12-hour drive winding through the Smokey Mountains, we pulled into yet another Motel 6 and got into a nasty fight about nothing, about everything—bickering like old lovers tired of each other's irritating idiosyncrasies. We shouted at each other in the parking lot; the Mexican gardeners, hard at work keeping the Motel 6 lawns green and trim for the itinerant salesmen and middle-class families on their shoestring vacations, watched with bemused curiosity.



Joe stalked off. And returned a few hours later after a sojourn to the local Borders Books (yes, even in the outback of the Carolinas they drink espresso and buy literature), with a copy of Robert Frank's *The Americans*, you know the one, with the introduction by Kerouac. It was a meant as a kiss-and-make up present for me. On the title page, Joe wrote: "To Rubén: An important time to look at America again."

So, over fifty years after Robert Frank snapped pictures and Kerouac wrote of an America kinetic and lazy and segregated and poor and brooding and impossibly big and varied, and over sixty years after Walker Evans and James Agee (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) revealed a part of America (Depression-era tenant farmers) indispensably important for to understand the changes taking place at that time, Joe and I went out on the road, looking to see the country at this new crossroads. May the gods of photography and literature forgive us what may be a certain dose of pretentiousness, but we believe there is a story that must be told.



I must say that when I began this project by moving to Mexico City in February of 1996, I didn't think that I'd be writing about "America" (I envisioned writing a book more specifically about change in Mexico), but then again, I didn't think that I'd be in Raleigh, North Carolina in May of 1997 or in Cherán, Michoacán in June of 1996 . . . or Nogales, Arizona, or Warren, Arkansas, or Watsonville, California, or Washington, D.C. But the road opened itself up to me, through the people that I met, and I had no choice but to become the road, and let the road

become this project.

The *New Americans* is a project that will be distilled in various media. I will publish a book in late 1998, with photographs by Joe; there will be several articles appearing in various print media in the coming months, also with photographs by Joe; there will be vignettes aired on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered"; and then there is what you are seeing now: an "exhibit" of some of our work-in-progress.



But this is only the beginning of the ZoneZero portion of the project. We have received funding from the Rockefeller Foundation to continue posting our work on the Internet through this Website. We will try to replicate, as "virtually" as possible, a new series of research trips in the late Spring of 1998. Joe, armed with a digital camera, and I with a computer and modem, will send "dispatches" from various places and participate in live "chats" with those interested in the issues raised by our documentary work. We hope you will join us. Stay tuned for updates on the exhibit and "chats."