

Three

Murals and Mexicans



Chicanos in the United States

Balboa or Diego Rivera

When Mexican Americans enter the United States, they are asked to assimilate into a nation that harbors drastically different interpretations of their place in the history of the Americas. The clash is intense. It is the story of Vasco Nuñez Balboa versus Diego Rivera.

In 1915, the city fathers of San Diego wanted to put their town on the map. They decided to do so by imitating the “White City,” the nickname given to the glistening exhibitions at Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair. Since this was California, the planners of what came to be titled the Panama-California Exposition proudly favored a “Spanish colonial” style of architecture. Paying their way with gold extracted from Mexico and other Spanish colonies, soldiers of fortune who had succeeded in New Spain returned home. They built mansions but never acquired the social status they craved and expected. Disillusioned, they once again sailed to the New World, where they extracted further riches from the colonies and used them to design buildings based on Mexican imagination. One historian of San Diego’s Balboa Park writes, “Many buildings in Mexico were done by men who had only a

passing acquaintance with Spanish architecture and its ornate character. Thus the buildings showed a decided Indian influence.”¹

This was Spanish colonial architecture, a style that used Mexican carpenters and stonemasons to erect monuments ornamented with Spanish names and symbols. American architects created the Balboa Park exposition buildings but, following the colonial storyline, made Spain the center of Mexican and San Diego history. On the face of the California Building, they carved a bust of Philip III of Spain, a Spanish coat of arms, and a statue of Sebastián Vizcaíno, the Spanish explorer who “rediscovered” San Diego Bay after his predecessors lost it. The rear wall of the building contained a bust of Carlos III of Spain, a Mexican coat of arms, and a statue of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, the explorer who first discovered (and then apparently lost) San Diego Bay.

Five years in the planning, the exposition’s groundbreaking ceremonies (on July 19, 1911) were designed to attract national and international attention. “King Cabrillo” presided over a ten-part historical pageant. Part one of the pageant included a group of Aztec priests sacrificing Indians to the god of war. Balboa then saved the day by taking possession of the Pacific Ocean for the king of Spain, who “presided over the Fall of the Aztec Dynasties and the rise of Christian rule.” Eventually, the pageant’s promoters raised the American flag over Old Town San Diego, with a quick stop in Rome. “King Neptune presided at the wedding of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.” Brothers under the skin, Columbus and Balboa discovered the New World, only to see it rediscovered and renamed the United States of America.

The exposition proved to be such a success that the California Building and other buildings remain to this day a central element of San Diego’s Balboa Park. Even the greenhouses flourish as part of an outdoor museum that now also contains the Centro Cultural de La Raza. Prominent signs direct visitors to the Centro Building. But, once you arrive, it looks like a water tower. Actually, it *is* a water tower donated to La Raza as a sign of the Mexican influence in Southern California. You enter the metal monster expecting to find murals designed by local youth or at least large prints of the museum work of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. Instead, there is a large portrait of Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican leader of the back-to-Africa movement in the

early twentieth century. Other portraits celebrate Malcolm X; Martin Luther King Jr.; and, with a wall of his own, Che Guevara. Even here the dominant colors are white and black. The Centro Building does offer a newspaper devoted to Native American issues but nothing as magnificent as Diego Rivera's rediscovery of Spanish, American, and Mexican history.

In 1929, Rivera began what is arguably the best-known mural in the Americas. Called "The History of Mexico," the mural is a spectacular portrait of Mexico that mocks U.S. perceptions of men like Columbus and Balboa. At Mexico's National Palace, the New World turns into what Chicanos now call Occupied America. "The History of Mexico" is the lasting alternative to the White City or Balboa Park because it proudly presents all Mexicans with an image of self that defies the white/black dichotomy. Mexicans must be none-of-the-above because the first Mexican was a combination, a fusion of fused ancestries.

To reach the mural, you need to cross the Zocalo (the main plaza) in Mexico City. The plaza is filled with every imaginable temptation—even shamans—but with luck and persistence, you can squeeze yourself into a group of uniformed Mexican students also getting their first glimpse of Diego Rivera's masterpiece. While the massive mural spans three walls, teachers trying to instill a sense of national identity focus on only three figures: the Spaniard Hernán Cortéz, the Indian Malinche, and their child, Martín. Cortéz is proud, rugged, and ruthless, while Malinche stares wistfully into space; she could be dreaming as she comforts the bronze-skinned boy fearfully burying himself in his mother's embrace.

The boy, Martín Cortéz de Malinche, is the first Mexican. Combination is his middle name, mixed with his proud and undeniable ancestry. For Mexican children the mural is a mirror: students see themselves on the wall as teachers use Rivera's colorful image to celebrate the ethnic fusions created by Spanish imperialism as the axis of Mexican national identity. From this perspective, Columbus and Balboa found not a new world but the ancient civilization of the Aztecs. On one wall, Rivera paints that ancient world, including its notorious human sacrifices. The sun shines a bold yellow at the center of the Aztec scene; despite the battles and poisonous serpents, the portrayal

is a heartfelt homage to a world destroyed by the Spanish explorers and their Christian missionaries.

No Spaniard escapes blame in Rivera's rediscovery of Mexican history. Soldiers use cannons to destroy the Indians. Even as some priests are baptizing converts, other priests are torturing Indians for daring to worship their own gods. At the top of this center wall, Mexicans are saving Mexico. Heroes and villains of Mexican history appear side by side because, as Desmond Rochfort has written, "the ideological premise of the center wall is that Mexican national history arises out of the conquest."²

In 1929 that conquest focused on the Spanish; today it includes the American conquest of the Mexican Southwest. Two diametrically different versions of the past define the status of Mexicans living in the United States. In a world of white and black, Balboa (or Christopher Columbus) discovered the New World for a new race. In the world of Diego Rivera, Mexicans started as a fusion born from colliding civilizations. As the first member of La Raza, Martín Cortéz de Malinche was multicultural before the word even existed.

Mexicans make up 63 percent of the Hispanics in the United States. They have led the list of new immigrants to the United States for more than a decade, and one study estimates that Mexicans now represent the largest immigrant group in thirty of the fifty United States. California boasts more Spanish-language radio stations than all the nations of Central America combined; and in Texas gubernatorial candidates have suggested a televised debate in Spanish.³ And why not? A visitor walking through San Antonio or Austin hears Spanish almost as often as English.

Mexicans aspire to mainstream status in America, and their fused nature should be an inspiration to anyone seeking to transcend the white/black dichotomy. They could help redefine American national identity. It is a gift if we are willing to begin with a message to the Reagan White House.

On June 25, 1985, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture John R. Norton III wrote a letter to Dr. Ralph Bledsoe, special assistant to the president for policy development. Norton's letter referred to a seasonal worker program that could finally eliminate the millions of Mexicans

working illegally in the United States. The Reagan administration wanted to get rid of the Mexican problem that threatened to expose its tacit support of the illegal labor force and give the lie to its law-and-order ideology. Norton understood the president's position but suggested two insuperable obstacles. First, "we have had an implied national policy to encourage our citizens to rise above the necessity to perform agricultural harvest labor as a means of livelihood." Second, "our border states where the preponderance of our fresh fruits and vegetables are produced have depended on labor from south of the border since the very inception of this type of diversified agriculture." Americans expected fresh fruits and vegetables at the supermarket, and that meant that the White House needed to accept "*the total dependence of the (agricultural) industry on Mexican labor during approximately sixty years.*"⁴

As Richard Rodriguez puts it, Mexicans were here when here was there; and U.S. agricultural and business interests relied on Mexican labor in the development of California, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado, among other states. As Charles Teague told readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* on March 10, 1928, "most of the great development work of this area has been accomplished and is maintained by Mexican labor. The great industries of the Southwest—agricultural, horticultural, viticulture, mining, stock raising and so on—are to a very large extent dependent upon the Mexican labor . . . This region's railways were built and their roadways are maintained by Mexicans."⁵

America relied on Mexican labor, but, as Edwin Meese, then attorney general, told President Reagan in a spring 1981 memo, the dependence had extended to more and more industries. Although the persistent stereotype was that undocumented Mexicans worked almost exclusively in agriculture, the reality in 1981 was that, while agriculture did rely on Mexicans, other industries also found them indispensable. The attorney general stressed that "only 15–25% of illegal aliens are now in agriculture; most are in blue collar and service occupations." In hotels and restaurants, on construction sites, and in office clean-up crews, Mexicans were needed by the nation so much that "everyone agrees on increased border enforcement; but no one believes this will solve the problem."⁶

In 2007 America still needs Mexican (and other) immigrants as much as the immigrants need the work. But, instead of trying to face the truth, we seem determined to avoid it. As Congressman Ted Poe (R-Texas) stressed on November 16, 2005, “The Mexican American War started because Mexicans did not recognize the Texas-Mexico border at the time. They ignored the treaty that their dictator, Santa Anna signed, and they invaded the United States in 1846. Sound familiar? It seems to me that a second attempt at invasion and colonization has already begun. Is Mexico trying to retake the Southwest? . . . Only history will reveal the answers to that.”⁷

Poe is right, but not in the way he intended. History—accurate history—is the only way to understand Mexican resistance to the white/black dichotomy and the melting pot metaphor. We can never appreciate this aversion unless we also appreciate how Mexican immigrants got to the United States and how they have been treated since their arrival. Mexican reactions to U.S. culture arise under particular economic and political conditions, in a culture that, even as it endlessly relies on Mexicans, simultaneously struggles to define the “racial” designation of the Mexican people.

The Lone Star State

In 1969 Senator Walter Mondale (D-Minnesota) drove to the Texas-Mexican border. As part of his research for congressional hearings, Mondale wanted a firsthand look at border crossings and at the mass of “commuters” who, instead of swimming, walked across an international border without ever presenting a passport. As Mondale watched the workers cross the bridge unhindered, he saw that many waved new crisp baptismal certificates. Curious, Mondale asked immigration officials about the use of documents that were obviously hot off the press. Certainly, no twenty-five-year-old man or woman owned a creaseless baptismal certificate, and, even if they did, what did it prove? That the day workers were Catholic?⁸

To Mondale’s surprise—he remarked, “I had never heard of this until I went down to the border myself”—the baptismal certificates “proved” that the Mexicans were American citizens. Fake birth

certificates were harder to get and cost more money to buy. Instead, workers went to the back door of a local church or some other location, got the baptismal certificate, and then raced across the border like a power walker. As Mondale explained to his colleagues, “they are coming through there so fast that if they bothered to check one out of every twenty of them, they would have had Mexicans backed up to Mexico City.”

Immigration officials echoed the senator’s concerns. They emphasized their enforcement efforts: “For the seventh consecutive year there was an increase in the number of claims to false citizenship encountered by the Border Patrol.” The statistics might have made them look better, but since all concerned agreed that the baptismal certificates were new, and bogus proof of citizenship at that, why did officials allow the endless line of Mexicans to cross the border each day?

The charade continued because American employers dream the impossible dream: of employees who work for low wages, who labor under miserable conditions, and who conveniently disappear back into Mexico or at least to another part of Texas or the United States. In 1969 the baptismal certificates helped solve a short-term problem that never addressed a long-term need. As one grower told Congress in 1920, “the Mexican in Texas has been there from the time of the Republic and before we were there.” Moreover, “our entire industry, beginning, whenever it commenced, back in 1836, is absolutely and unconditionally based upon Mexican labor.”⁹

Taking pictures of remote crossings in Arizona, contemporary critics want us to focus on what Professor Otto Santa Ana, tongue in cheek, calls a brown tide rising. Chicanos might ask that we forget the tide and focus instead on the currents that made Mexicans such an important part of the American way of life.

In the late nineteenth century, land, water, and people became commodities throughout the Southwest and especially in Texas. The small Mexican elite still thought of land as “a family patrimony, as the basis for preserving a traditional way of life.” Ranchers—Anglo or otherwise—saw land as raw material for the business of raising and selling

cattle. Ranchers needed money to buy the land and more money to pay cowboys to enclose it with barbed wire. In Texas, Scottish bankers helped provide the capital, and Mexicans who failed to become “real” ranchers found themselves eliminated from the land as quickly as pesky prairie dogs. With the fences in places, Mexicans and Americans with cattle but no land discovered that their animals were suddenly deprived of access to water and food. They responded by cutting the fences; but over time traditional rights lost out to legal rights. This displacement of the Mexican landowners produced what David Montejano calls “devastating and irreversible effects”; only the lower classes remained because, except for a few exceptions, the Mexican elite never adapted to the idea of land as a commodity rather than as a sacred end in itself.¹⁰

As the nineteenth century ended, ranchers who successfully fenced out the competition suddenly discovered that they had competition of their own. With the growth of a railroad network and the evolution of a national market, wealthy capitalists with vision soon moved to turn cattle ranches into commercial farms. In Texas—and in California—crops like cotton and labor-intensive fruits and vegetables offered a new means to more money. Ranchers sold their land to developers who quickly faced an unforeseen problem. Farms needed farmers, and Texas lacked the right kind of people to farm the land.

In response, Texas developers borrowed a page from P. T. Barnum. Distributing thousands of brochures throughout the Midwest and the South, developers promised “an Eden like existence” to anyone interested in a farming paradise. Long before the invention of free trips to investigate a time-share in Hawaii, Texas developers used the first and third Tuesday of every month to underwrite “special excursion trains” that brought midwestern and southern farmers to southern Texas’s “Magic Valley.” The parched soil needed water, but for those with ambition and access to capital the lure of Eden proved to be irresistible. Montejano stresses that the resulting land rush was one of the most phenomenal land movements in the history of the United States. Commercial, labor-intensive farms multiplied as the nature of the population in Texas and other Southwest states changed dramatically.¹¹

Emigrating from the South and Midwest, the newcomers arrived with a white and black worldview. Whites ate here; blacks ate there. These farmers knew what to do under the watchful eye of Jim Crow. Meanwhile, the Mexicans living in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California presented a definitional problem to the new whites. One contemporary observer explained that “society in the Southwest cannot easily adapt itself to the handling of a second racial problem . . . for Mexican immigrants there is no congenial group to welcome them . . . they are not Negroes . . . they are not accepted as white men, and between the two, the white and the black, there seems to be no midway position.”¹²

Writing for *Scribner's* magazine, John G. Bourke told a national audience that southern Texas was “the American Congo.” Even in Laredo and Brownsville, people of fine breeding existed, but they “exerted about as much influence upon the indigenes as did the Saxon or Danish invaders upon the Celts of Ireland.” In fact, the generous Texans who gave Mexicans the right to vote “cast the precious pearl of the ballot before swine.” It was time to accept a simple fact: Mexicans “constitute a distinct class resisting all attempts at amalgamation.”¹³

Some Mexicans managed to escape the Congo characterization. In California, a more expansive definition of *white* could include people who spent time in the sun because, as a way to compensate for brown skin, European ancestry raised a person's social standing. Even a drop of Spanish blood, “if it be only a quatroom or octaroon, is sufficient to raise them from the ranks of slaves, and entitle them to a suit of clothes, and to call themselves Espanoles, and to hold property if they can get any.” In New Mexico, Mexicans in search of creating a midway position called themselves “Hispanos.” Celebrating their glorious Spanish ancestry, Hispanos saw nothing wrong with the celebrations in the White City or Balboa Park. On the contrary, they accentuated their links to Spain and to the European roots that might give them social status in the American Southwest.¹⁴

In Texas whites gave Mexicans little room to maneuver. They decided who got what, and they decided to segregate the Mexicans as a means of resolving a now institutionalized contradiction of Ameri-

can life. As one fellow noted, “*irrigation means Mexicans.*” One demanded the other, especially when it involved the “stoop and squat” labor that no white American wanted to do. So, here was the problem: how could the whites “absorb” immigrants they never wanted but always needed? Only 5 percent of the population of southern Texas in 1900, Mexicans increased in numbers as fast as the laws designed to keep them in their place, that is, working on the farms and picking crops—for as long as the farmers needed them.¹⁵

Ironically, this effort to prevent Mexican assimilation arose during the height of the national movement to Americanize immigrants capable of amalgamation. White Russians got into the melting pot, while Mexicans learned that their nonwhite status meant they were incapable of Americanization. They therefore learned to read forbidding signs denying them entry to everything from eateries to hotels. In 1902 Texas legislators passed the poll tax laws that removed the privilege so carelessly granted. In addition, the few Mexicans who got a chance to go to school found themselves in inferior, segregated facilities. Spanish was the one and only language of instruction there in a society demanding that Europeans learn English as the first step toward becoming full-fledged Americans.

Another irony is that the movement to restrict immigration of Asians and southern Europeans increased the need for Mexicans in the American Southwest and in other parts of the United States, for example, Michigan. With no hint of sarcasm, Congress in 1920 listened to farmers plead for Mexican labor and then titled the hearings “Temporary Admission of Illiterate Mexican Laborers.” Six years later an Arizona farmer in search of seasonal workers reminded Congress that it paid for many of the large and small irrigation projects that created demand for Mexicans. Congress needed to reopen the gates because, as the farmer argued, “we feel, gentlemen, that there has been born in the West an infant Empire. We feel that you are its legitimate father, now what shall we do? Shall we let it grow up a dwarf, a hunchback, or shall we develop it to its full stature?”¹⁶

Congress answered by closing its eyes to two of the earliest controversies concerning Mexicans, the Immigration Service, and the Border Patrol. With Mexicans already accounting for 10 percent of *legal*

migration to the United States, immigration officials allowed labor recruiters to place their offices in a prominent location: Recruiters stood right outside the buildings of the Immigration Service. No one policed them nor did anyone bother with illegal Mexicans at the end of a fiscal year.

Testifying in 1928, District Director of Immigration Grover Wilmuth explained that the Border Patrol paid the costs of transporting immigrants back to Mexico. When he ran out of funds toward the end of the year, Wilmuth told Congress he simply allowed his prisoners to “voluntarily return” to Mexico. Congressman Bird J. Vincent could not believe his ears. You mean you “turn him loose in the country?” When Wilmuth said “absolutely,” the following exchange took place.

Congressman Vincent: The very fact that you had, say, a dozen Mexicans herded in some place and that you gave them a chance to go back to Mexico and they said they would not go, and then you very politely turned them loose, that would indicate to their mind that there was a screw loose somewhere, would it not?

Grover Wilmuth: Yes sir: that is a natural inference.¹⁷

The Road to Aztlán

In 1924, 87,648 Mexican immigrants legally entered the United States. The number arriving because of the “screw loose” program is unknown. In 1931, only 2,627 Mexican immigrants entered legally. The Depression crushed agriculture with such force that one estimate from California counted more than two workers for every available job. Somebody needed to go, so the U.S. Department of Labor assured the nation “that work would be provided for unemployed Americans by deportation of employed illegal aliens.” In the decade 1930–39, Mexicans accounted for 1 percent of the U.S. population but 46.3 percent of all individuals deported. Estimates vary on the precise number of Mexican immigrants exiled, but an educated approximation is one million men, women, and children. Fully 60 percent of these exiles were U.S. citizens. It was a cruel, unprecedented expul-

sion of a people, leaving scars so deep that, even in 2006, many of those exiled refuse to talk about it.¹⁸

In 1942 the U.S. government reopened the Mexican-American border. Starved for labor because of the war effort, Washington looked south, with its new Bracero Program (*brazo* is Spanish for “arm”). Over time, U.S. officials made agricultural and other American employers more dependent on Mexican labor than ever before. It was an unintended transformation, whose ripple effects extend into the twenty-first century.

The Bracero Program was predicated on the notion that, with the Mexican government policing the process, laborers’ rights would be protected. Meanwhile, farmers would get the cheap labor they wanted. The first line of the contract signed by laborers said this: “The worker will be employed exclusively in agricultural work.”¹⁹

But what happened if the temporary laborer decided to leave the farm and seek work elsewhere? As a long-term job, stoop and squat labor only appealed to the most desperate; anyone with a chance to leave the farm for a better job elsewhere would probably do so. Especially if nonagricultural employers readily accepted the now illegal workers (e.g., in Chicago), the Bracero Program contained a built-in contradiction: temporary workers left the farms while agriculture’s needs remained the same or even increased. Somebody still needed to pick the crops, or, as California agricultural commissioner B. A. Harrison told Congress, “I have lived in Imperial Valley for a good many years. I can say that historically the desert areas have depended entirely on the Mexicans to stand the intense heat in those areas.” Unfortunately, people tired; they got too old to do stoop labor, and their children, seeing what happened to their parents, took jobs in the cities. The result was that “about every twenty years . . . we find it necessary to have a new blood transfusion, so to speak, to get a new supply of stoop labor.”²⁰

Between 1942 and the end of the Bracero Program in 1964, more than four million workers came to the United States as temporary laborers. By definition, the number of illegal immigrants remained hidden in the Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California underbrush. The one certainty is that the demand for labor proved to be

insatiable. The archives at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin contain a mountain of telegrams to then Senator Johnson. Year after year, one message after another, the pleas remained the same. Keep Washington off our backs and let us have the only workers who will do the work we need. As W. T. Millen, president of the Bailey County Farm Bureau, told Senator Johnson in 1958, “they [Mexicans] will do a type of work such as irrigating and hand labor that the American who is used to high wages will not do . . . so please see if something can be done to right this injustice being imposed on the farmer.”²¹

Injustice is in the eye of the beholder. Farmers only thought of themselves, oblivious to charges of economic slavery and, just as important, the rigid segregation of Mexican students throughout the Southwest. Farmers only wanted another generation of stoop and squat labor. Conversely, after World War II, the roughly four million Mexicans living in the United States also sought social justice because they began to analyze seriously their children’s prospects in a society that denied them even the tiny openings offered to African Americans. Institutions like Howard University or Tuskegee University allowed at least some African Americans to get a higher education.²² In contrast, Mexicans encountered a world that offered no openings, only an educational system that systematically condemned their children to a future on the farm, in the mines, or in construction.

In 1946 people who identified as Mexican Americans tried to work within the system. In *Gonzalo Mendez v. Westminster*, a couple and four co-plaintiffs sued four California school districts for segregating their children. Orange County administrators had decided that, allegedly for the children’s own good, English-speaking students should attend school in one building, while Spanish-speaking children should go to another. However, students took “no credible language test”; those who looked Anglo went to the school with markedly better facilities and supplies, while those who looked Mexican or had a “Spanish surname” went to the run-down building. In a society that supposedly welcomed the assimilation of its immigrants, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California found, in *Mendez v. Westminster*,

that “the evidence clearly shows that the Spanish speaking children are clearly retarded in learning English by lack of exposure to its use because of segregation.” In addition, “it was also established by the record that the methods of segregation prevalent in the defendant school districts foster antagonisms in the children and suggest inferiority among them where none exists.”²³

When the district court ordered the California school districts to desegregate, it listened with all the attention that farmers and other employers reserved for their workers. De facto, little changed after *Mendez*, as Mexicans in search of a different future argued about tactics and strategy. Throughout the forties and fifties the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) often sought to dissociate itself from African Americans. It agreed that Mexicans suffered from learned prejudice and institutionalized discrimination, but, as a cure, “it promoted the image of Mexican Americans as a white ethnic group.” In response, the critics who fathered the Chicano protest movements of the 1960s asked a simple question: Why would we want to assimilate into a society that refuses to teach our children the English language as it systematically prepares them for the low-wage, low-skill jobs that are the “destiny” of the inferior Mexican people?²⁴

Asociación Nacional México-Americana (ANMA) offered an alternative. Founded in Denver in 1949, the Spanish-speaking organization represented Mexicans who worked in the mines, mills, and smelters of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. ANMA cited the 1846 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as a prime example of how the United States made promises but never kept them. Seeking to end Anglos’ systematic subjugation of Mexicans throughout the Southwest, ANMA endorsed a radical reaffirmation of traditional Mexican values and beliefs. If the American school and political system taught “inferiority,” then Mexicans needed to find a sense of pride and dignity in their past and their culture. Instead of assimilating into white society, Mexicans needed to “never completely integrate themselves into all aspects of the national life of this country.” Instead, by speaking Spanish and cultivating ethnic roots, ANMA sought a basis for political organization that felled two Anglos with

one stone. Teach people to be proud and they walked with dignity as they now challenged and even defied the society that, since 1846, created “*el pueblo olvidado*” (the forgotten people).²⁵

ANMA’s message scared many Mexican and Anglo Americans in 1952. The FBI began to investigate the group and, alleging communist infiltration, called ANMA a security threat to the United States. The organization defended itself, but the battle quickly drained its scarce resources. ANMA was effectively defunct by 1954. LULAC and other white-leaning organizations carried the flag of Mexican rights for the next decade as the elimination of the Bracero Program left both countries—not to mention Mexicans and Mexican Americans—with another institutionalized problem.

Mexico now depended on American jobs as much as America depended on the cheap, exploitable Mexican labor. Remittances—money sent home by the workers—were a major source of support in maintaining the unemployed in Mexico. They were only able to stay home because others went north. If the demand for legal workers and the toleration of illegal workers ceased, the United States now faced the prospect of more rather than less migration because Mexicans and the relatives who could no longer depend on remittances would need to find jobs wherever they could.

Fear of a flood of new immigrants was one motive behind the decision by the governments of the United States and Mexico to join forces—in the early 1960s—by creating factories south of the Rio Grande. Mexico changed its laws to permit U.S. factories to establish themselves near the U.S. border and outsource to Mexico the assembly and other low-skilled jobs that saved money for U.S. corporations as they created jobs for the Mexicans, who, with work available, would presumably remain home. In practice, many of the jobs only went to young, tractable women, so the men still needed to find work north of the border. They easily did so because, despite predictions by Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, farmers refused to replace stoop and squat labor with the latest technology.

Mechanizing agriculture could replace the need for Mexican labor but only under certain conditions:

- *If* President Johnson and Congress stopped the creation of new provisos that allowed employers to escape responsibility for hiring illegal laborers.
- *If* Congress and the president policed the labor contractors who increasingly provided a legal shield for employers.
- *If* the Border Patrol actually enforced the laws—remember those birth certificates in 1969—against the entry of illegal workers.

When the president and Congress yet again caved into farm interests, the system fed on itself. Workers came, they eventually left the farms, and the demand to replenish the labor supply proved as forceful as the civil rights movement and its offspring, the National Farm Workers Association headed by César Chávez.

ANMA preached cultural solidarity in a decade dominated by politicians like Senator Joseph McCarthy. As the 1950s ended, new Mexican activists worked during one of American history's most inviting decades for radical social change. With different perspectives about the struggle for human and civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr. preached from a pulpit in Alabama while Malcolm X spoke from one in Harlem. On campuses students staged strikes challenging allegedly autocratic administrators, and, with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan helped start the women's movement. Meanwhile, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, the peace movement preached against the war, and in Washington Congress transformed the nation's immigration laws in 1965 because all men and women were created equal.

Even the language changed. Since *Negro* was allegedly a white word for African Americans, *black* suddenly became a positive rather than a negative social identity. Black was beautiful and so too the environment for minority groups seeking to assert their rights and their heritage.

In the Southwest, Mexicans rediscovered not Balboa's Pacific Ocean but their membership in "La Raza Cósmica" (the Cosmic Race). Mexicans became Chicanos, a group whose indigenous roots claimed to be older than the Native Americans.

Joaquín and La Virgen de Guadalupe

In March 1966, César Chávez led a march from Delano to Sacramento, California. He was accompanied by Emiliano Zapata and La Virgen de Guadalupe. In presenting a list of demands called “The Plan of Delano,” Chávez openly “borrowed” from the revolutionary “Plan of Ayala” presented by Zapata in 1911. Equally important, when Chávez or one of his associates read (in Spanish and in English) the plan at each stop’s evening rally, they proudly and intentionally reaffirmed a Mexican tradition. One commentator correctly noted, “few rhetorical documents have been more powerful for Mexican Americans.”²⁶

Chavez’s other companion, the “dark faced” Virgen de Guadalupe, is the mother of all Mexicans. She appeared to an Indian named Juan Diego in 1531, speaking the commoner’s language of Nahuatl and wearing blue-green robes, the color reserved for the Aztec deities who created and unified the universe. She also wore a maternity belt—the symbol of new expectations—and was surrounded by the golden rays that suggested the presence of the sun god, Quetzalcoatl. Cynics say that the Virgen is the sinful creation of a Catholic bishop seeking to convert the heathens. Whatever version one accepts, it was a stroke of religious genius for the Virgen to have given these instructions to Juan Diego: Build a shrine to me on the site brutally destroyed by the Spanish. Build my home on the one that formerly housed Tonanizin, the “gentle” Aztec goddess of earth and corn, whose Nahuatl name means “our mother.”

Like Martín Cortéz de Malinche, the Virgen represents an incredible bridge between one world and another. After her appearance, all Mexicans suddenly had someone to listen to their prayers and help them through bad times. By T. R. Fehrenbach’s estimate in *Fire and Blood*, in the first fifteen years after her appearance, nine million Amerindians happily accepted their baptism into the Catholic religion.²⁷

Four hundred and thirty-five years later, César Chávez used the Virgen to preach pilgrimage, penance, and revolution. Mexican pilgrims marched on Sacramento and demanded, for the descendants of the dark-skinned Virgen, “justice, freedom and respect from a predominantly foreign cultural community in a land where he [the Mexican

American] was first. The revolutions of Mexico were primarily uprisings of the poor, fighting for bread and for dignity. The Mexican American is also a child of the revolution.”²⁸

Chávez preached revolution, with an assurance that the Virgen cleared his path. He seemed quite secure in his cultural beliefs, and he certainly knew his place in the pilgrimage. He was a poor Mexican American courageously and adamantly demanding bread and dignity from a foreign cultural community.

In the decade of civil rights, many Mexican Americans wanted to confront the establishment. But these younger activists wanted far more than the rights of farmworkers. They argued that, however important, focusing on farmworkers “reinforced” the stereotypes suggesting that only one type of Mexican existed; and, in sharp contrast to César Chávez’s assured use of traditional Mexican religious beliefs and symbols, many younger Mexican Americans felt lost in the foreign cultural community. In a photo taken in 1970, Chávez sits at a table surrounded by young people wearing brown berets, capes, and masks that hide as much as they reveal. A huge portrait of the Virgen looks on as the young people sport symbols derived from the Black Panthers and Che Guevara. The generations joined in the struggle for justice, but, for the younger people, a short poem called “Yo Soy Joaquín” (I Am Joaquín) resonated with the force of a *new* cultural revelation.

Here is a portion of the poem:

I am Joaquín,
lost in a world of confusion,
caught up in the whirl of a
gringo society,
confused by the rules,
scorned by attitudes,
suppressed by manipulation,
and destroyed by modern society.
My fathers
have lost the economic battle
and won
the struggle of cultural survival.

And now!
I must choose
between
the paradox of
victory of the spirit,
despite physical hunger,
or
to exist in the grasp
of American social neurosis,
sterilization of the soul
and a full stomach.²⁹

Written in Denver by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles, the poem depicts the experiences of someone who fled the farms for the city. Gonzáles “was the product of an urban environment, a man who spoke to the young because he and they wanted to escape the stifling sense of shame that came with being Mexican American.” In another line, the poem reads, “Inferiority is the new load . . . I look at myself and see part of me who rejects my father and my mother and dissolves into the melting pot to disappear in shame.”

Written in 1967, the poem spread through the nation not by e-mail but by mimeographs. Copied on school, business, and (I would guess) church machines, the poem found a ready audience among young Mexican Americans who passionately wanted to create a future full of hope. Unfortunately, “I Am Joaquín” asked as many questions as it answered. Joaquín definitely knew what he opposed. Now came the hard part. What did he propose?

With questions literally on everyone’s lips, another activist, Luis Valdez, provided a way to radically and imaginatively rethink the past. “Most of us know we are not European simply by looking in the mirror . . . the shape of the eyes, the curve of the nose, the color of skin, the texture of hair; these things belong to another time, another people.”³⁰

Who were these people? Valdez and his cocreators decided the solution was, as with the change from *Negro* to *black*, to turn a negative into a positive. During the Bracero Program, many Indians had appar-

ently pronounced “Mexicanos” as “Mesheecanos.” This was quickly turned into a derogatory term for Mexicans. As the slander had it, these people were so bad they did not even know how to pronounce properly their own name.

With Valdez as an advocate, *Chicano* became a positive word for a new ethnicity, invented in California yet having deep roots in the nonwhite origins of the Mexican American people. Murals appeared on every street corner and freeway pillar as Chicanos rediscovered Deigo Rivera and his mentor, José Vasconcelos. As Mexico’s secretary of public education in the 1920s, Vasconcelos commissioned many of Deigo Rivera’s early works. He wanted something the people could touch because he believed they represented *La Raza Cósmica*. Vasconcelos argued, “The days of the pure whites, the conquerors of today, are so numbered that it is as if they were already our predecessors.” Whites destroy races; we assimilate them, and “this gives us new rights and expectations of a mission without an historical precedent.”³¹

In one passage of his essay “*La Raza Cósmica*,” Vasconcelos talks about America’s prejudice toward the Japanese. “The white women of San Francisco actually refuse to dance with members of the Japanese Navy,” even though they are as intelligent, refined, and handsome as anyone on earth is. Vasconcelos stresses that, while people are also aware of bloodlines in Latin America, that awareness is “infinitely less,” and in the deep divide between north and south of the Rio Grande lies the future of humanity. The cosmic race is, for Vasconcelos, “the definitive race,” the race “made with the genius and the blood of all peoples, and, therefore, more capable of true fraternity and a really universal vision.”³²

Embrace of *La Raza Cósmica* requires that Chicanos make a number of very important decisions. In Spanish the concept of *raza* is rooted in the notion of *mestizaje*; following writers like Cuba’s José Martí, Vasconcelos uses the word to underline the ethnic combinations that make us (Latin Americans) different from them (Anglos or North Americans). *Raza* denotes ethnic mixtures that contrast sharply with the white and black world created in the United States. But, would the new race get a color? Or, radically breaking with the past,

would the new race affirm ethnic fusions by stressing that physical differences—recall the handsome Japanese officers—are *only* wonderfully diverse manifestations of our underlying and indissoluble unity? From this perspective, *raza* would ignore the physical in favor of the beliefs, values, and practices that defined people by what united them, their membership in the only race that actually existed, the cosmic race.

An answer to these questions came in March 1969. “Yo Soy Joaquín” author “Corky” Gonzáles and his Denver associates hosted a weeklong conclave widely advertised as a “National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference.” Worried about the assimilation of Mexican youth into the white world of the gringos, Gonzáles argued that *los vendidos* (the sellouts) would return to *la raza* if Chicanos offered them a meaningful analysis of their identity and future as a nation. “Nationalism exists but until now, it hasn’t been formed into an image people can see. Until now it has been a dream . . . nationalism is the key to our people liberating themselves . . . we are an awakening people, and emerging nation, a new breed.”³³

The new group’s declaration of independence was published at the end of the weeklong conclave. “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” (the Spiritual Plan of Atzlan) was a manifesto that discovered the original homeland of the Mexican, now Chicano, people. In Aztec history, Aztlán indicates the mythical place of the origin of the Aztec peoples. Scholars had long and unsuccessfully searched for the actual location of Atzlan, but now, here it was, incredibly, right before their eyes. In a bold and an imaginative display of cultural creativity—of Fernando Ortiz’s transculturation—Chicanos claimed that Aztlán and the American Southwest were different names for the same thing. In this scenario, Chicanos came first, long before La Virgen de Guadalupe and the other symbols of Mexican culture. In fact, instead of the Chicanos being descended from the Aztecs, the Aztecs traced their roots to the Chicanos. Even before Native Americans, the new genealogy claimed, Chicanos peopled Aztlán or what soon became “occupied America.”³⁴

The plan also declared the independence of their mestizo nation. Following Vasconcelos, Chicanos celebrated their many ethnicities, but, following whites and blacks, they also asserted themselves as a

bronze people, with a bronze culture. To critics this looked like a contradiction. Races were by definition homogeneous groups of people. How could Chicanos be mixed and pure at the same time? And, equally important, why measure differences by skin color in the first place? In announcing their revolution, Chicanos had chosen a criterion to define themselves—skin color—that affirmed the ideology of the slave traders who replaced *Moor* with *black*. *Chicano* rejected *white* as it simultaneously set the parameters of the Chicano response. “According to Chicanos, and many Mexicans today, Mexicans were racially brown by nature, and contrary beliefs, politics or attitudes could render one inauthentic but not actually white.” The tragedy for many Mexicans in 1969 revolved around a simple fact: They thought they were white, and false consciousness moved them to embrace a society that would never accept them. Like the Syrian Hamas Shadid in South Carolina, Mexicans were chasing after the impossible.³⁵

Focusing on color also produced a negative impact on other “people of color.” In its strongest articulations, *Chicano* redefined people by what already divided them in a poisonous fashion. Soon after the plan’s publication, attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta announced that “the black man came here as a slave. He is not of this land. He is so removed from his ancestry that he has nothing but the white society to identify with. We have history. We have culture. We had a land.” Chicanos meant to get back what was theirs—the Southwest—but for all the diversity of their ethnic roots, Acosta said that some counted more than others did. “Of course there is Spanish and European blood in us but we don’t often talk about it because it is not something we are proud of. For me, my native ancestry is crucial.”³⁶

Chicanos wanted to produce a sense of pride so they discarded the roots they despised and emphasized the roots they relished. This sleight of hand put symbols like La Virgen de Guadalupe into a secondary category because the link that really mattered derived from the Chicano’s indigenous roots. Acosta stressed that, in contrast to blacks, “we do feel solidarity with the American Indians because we are Indians . . . I look upon them as my blood brothers. It is the Indian aspect of our ancestry that gives meaning to the term ‘La Raza.’”³⁷

A month after the publication of “the Spiritual Plan of Atzlan,” stu-

dents in Santa Barbara published another important manifesto. It created new and deep divisions within the Mexican American world when it stressed that “Chicanismo involves a crucial distinction in political consciousness between Mexican American [or Hispanic] and a Chicano mentality.” By definition, Mexican Americans lacked self-respect and pride; by assimilating into white, gringo society they affirmed the cultures that enslaved them. In contrast, the Chicano identity emphasized a rebirth of the indigenous pride that moved people to become self-determining members of a vibrant community. With training and education, Mexican Americans must see the light; they “must be viewed as potential Chicanos.” Meanwhile the best way to let them see the light was to again follow Vasconcelos: “At this moment we do not come to work for the university but to demand that the university work for our people.”³⁸

To foster the renaissance Chicanos created a nationwide organization that even today maintains active chapters in universities throughout the United States. The slogan of the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (M.E.Ch.A.)—“for those in the race, everything, for those outside the race, nothing”—focused student organizers on two goals: work in the community to arouse and create Chicanos and work in the university to develop the Chicano studies programs that would liberate the Mexican elite, the few who did get a chance to go to college. “Our people must understand not only the strategic importance of the university . . . they must above all perceive the university as being our university.”³⁹

No one told the professors or the administrators. In a battle that is still raging, Chicanos wanted the university to develop the local communities, to make colleges relevant to the people. In response, professors talked about academic integrity and the search for knowledge. To this day, Chicano and other ethnic studies programs are often accorded less prestige than they deserve because they are viewed as intellectually lightweight. In academic eyes, the presumed link to community development is a stain that never disappears.

Ultimately, however, Chicanos have won battle on university campuses across the United States. Their professors taught their history, and, with the concerted push to use higher education as a crucial

source of *raza* consciousness, movement leaders finished the essential design of what they wanted and how they got what they wanted.

Whatever its shortcomings, the Chicano movement did offer Mexicans an appealing alternative to the white/black dichotomy. Internal disputes soon weakened or destroyed specific movement organizations, but thirty-five years later, *Chicano* remains a significant identity for Mexican Americans throughout the United States. Equally important, movement organizers became professors. Especially west of the Mississippi, they established and institutionalized ethnic studies programs that only use this name: Chicano studies. Throughout California, New Mexico, and Texas, many universities may also have a program in Latin American or Caribbean studies, but, in addition, they normally have a separate program of Chicano studies. Since 1970, UCLA's program has proudly published a journal called *Aztlán*. Its spring 2004 issue featured a piece about "Corky" González, among other articles, all in Spanish. Meanwhile, the Chicano studies program at the University of New Mexico offered courses in the spring of 2004 that focused on the "impact of Anglo American imperialism on the Mexicans of El Norte (the American Southwest)." And, in an introduction to Chicano studies, students needed to answer this question: "What does it mean to be the descendent of an Aztec princess and a Spanish conquistador?"

Chicanos answered the race question with "none of the above." They celebrated *mestizaje* and the existence of a presumably homogeneous group of brown, sometimes bronze people. That left the white/black dichotomy firmly intact. No one heeded Albert Murray. Whites and blacks talked by one another, he lamented, as Chicanos, defining themselves as nonwhites, reaffirmed, "in one key hyphenated and hyphenating word," all "the fundamental assumptions of white supremacy and segregation."⁴⁰

Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and the Rule of Law

Chapter 8 contains an analysis of the contemporary illegal immigration debate. But that debate—and the accelerating anger of Americans and Mexicans—cannot be understood without first analyzing the actions of

a well-intentioned president. In 2006 we are still feeling the consequences of the legislation initiated by the Reagan administration.

From 1965 to 1986, fully 23.4 million undocumented workers made a round trip to Mexico. Coupled with legal migration, the net number of new, permanent residents totaled roughly 5.7 million Mexican Americans. In terms of identity, many would become Chicanos; but, as they made that transition, President Ronald Reagan confronted this fact: More than 80 percent of the new Mexican workers lacked documents.⁴¹ They flaunted the law, and that bothered the president. How could the United States claim to be a nation of laws, when employers and employees throughout the country flagrantly violated one law after another, one generation after another?

The president considered the usual options—a guest worker program, amnesty, more immigration slots. But guest workers needed to have a form of identification that would allow employers to check their status. When someone suggested a national ID card, the president himself spoke to the issue at a cabinet meeting. He argued that ID cards “smacked” of totalitarian states; America would never accept such a system so “we proposed instead a system whereby two or more standard IDs [e.g., birth certificate, driver’s license, green card, or even social security card] could be used to insulate an employer against a charge of illegal employment.”⁴²

No one asked how the rule of law prevailed if you “insulated” employers from punishment when they knowingly broke the law. Employers and lobbyists had skillfully pressured Congress for a “get out of jail free” card. Meanwhile, the president and his staff encountered serious problems with legalization. First, the American people would not swallow three to six million illegal immigrants in one gulp. Second, if the president made it too easy for Mexicans to become legal, he would be rewarding those who broke the law to enter and work in America. Finally, and this was the real problem, by admitting so large a group instantly into the welfare system, not only would the nation incur massive new costs at a time of fiscal restraint, but, equally as important, the president did not want “to run the risk of corrupting people who have for the most part revealed a strong devotion to the work ethic.”⁴³ America would be corrupting the Mexicans whose pres-

ence allegedly corrupted the country they had entered illegally. In the end, the White House negotiated and renegotiated with the appropriate House and Senate committees for more than four years.

The Reagan administration did its homework. It knew that undocumented migration meant more Mexicans or, even worse, more Chicanos; year after year, the White House seriously sought to change and enforce the laws. However, for White House staffers, lobbyists were lurking around every corner; the lobbyists were vigorously supported by senators and congressmen, who were themselves financially supported by the lobbyists and their American employers. In memo after memo, the White House tried to give immigration reform some semblance of sanity, but in 1986 the president surrendered. He supported a bill that mocked his intentions as it dramatically increased the number of legal and illegal Mexicans living in the United States of America.

Called the Immigration Reform and Control Act, the legislation offered amnesty to anyone able to prove continuous residence in America as of January 1, 1982. If someone lived in California or Texas before that date, he or she received legal status. That assured the rule of law except for what the White House called the “shadow effect.” Staffers expected many more permanent residents than Congress promised because “more persons, including dependants may already be here.” In addition, “many persons legalized may seek to *bring in* family members.” They would use the family reunification preference provisions of the immigration laws so one person could actually mean three or four new immigrants. And, when those immigrants brought in their relatives, the ripple effects assuredly went into the twenty-first century. For those opposing Mexicans, the new law came with a high price tag, raised again because, in the shadows, the new immigrants showed a relatively high birthrate.⁴⁴

The Reagan documents argue that final effect proved to be the most interesting of all: “many persons may *come* across the border illegally and claim eligibility as an individual or a dependent.” When the news got out, people would rush across the border and buy licenses or other IDs that proved residence before January 1982. In a flash, the hot-off-the-press documents “dried them out” as efficiently as the tactics used during the Bracero Program or the baptismal certificates

waved to border guards under the watchful eye of Senator Mondale in 1969.

With urban employers assured of workers, farmers deftly secured their interests by including “SAWS” in the new laws. This stood for “special agricultural workers” who had to prove that they labored in agriculture at least ninety days during 1984–86 or at least ninety days during the year ending May 1, 1986. Those who possessed or bought documents that proved agricultural employment could get permanent residence status within a short period. Staff memos indicate that this was a take-it-or-leave-it deal: the SAW “amendment is not considered negotiable in conference.” SAWS obviously promised even more “shadow effects,” and, as staffers noted, “it was an inequitable, ineffective and costly scheme to provide field harvest labor.” Since SAWS need not work in agriculture “once admitted to the U.S.,” the program arrived with a built-in need to “replenish” the SAW labor force, and, even more ominously, staffers doubted the estimate of one million SAWS—who became permanent residents—during 1987–91. If only because “aliens may be able to fraudulently claim eligibility for participation,” the White House knew that the number of SAWS grew as quickly as the documents streaming out of copy or other machines throughout the Southwest.⁴⁵

The bill did come with an employer verification provision. In capital letters, the White House learned that “EMPLOYERS WILL BE REQUIRED TO REQUEST AND VERIFY EMPLOYEE DOCUMENTS AND REQUIRE EMPLOYEES TO FILL OUT FORM REGARDING STATUS.” In regular typescript, staffers said that an affirmative defense “was available to employers who keep records of documents checked to verify employment status.”⁴⁶

Once passed, the bill’s dual legalization programs “ultimately provided residence documents” to more than 3 million people: 1.7 million legally authorized because they supposedly lived in the United States before 1982 and another 1.3 million of the SAWS who often did produce the fraudulent documents predicted by White House staffers. As Californians complained about the influx of new Mexican and other Latino immigrants, Los Angeles witnessed the legalization of some eight hundred thousand formerly undocumented workers. In six other metropolitan areas, the totals exceeded one hundred thou-

sand permanent residents and the relatives who soon followed in their legalized wake.⁴⁷

In surrendering to Congress, the lobbyists, and their employers, the Reagan administration championed the rule of law as it opened the door to a “Mexicanization” that soon overwhelmed many of the older ethnic enclaves in the Southwest. Chicanos met the “FOBs” (fresh over the border) who in some cases represented 40 percent of the local population.⁴⁸ In time, people started to identify themselves as “Chicana-Mexicana” or “Mexicana-Chicana.”⁴⁹ The Chicano call to arms, “Occupied America,” began to take on a very different meaning because the new legislation did nothing to stop what Attorney General William French Smith said was the “primary motivation” for Mexican and other immigrants: “Attractive employment opportunities in this country, particularly when compared to opportunities in the sending countries.”⁵⁰

Employers won the battle as the Reagan administration, in the name of law, embraced this irony: It legalized the illegal as it simultaneously allowed other illegals (the SAWS) to become fraudulently legal under the auspices of a bill dedicated to eliminating the illegal.

This history is important because, especially after 1986, many Americans continually complained about the millions of Mexicans invited to the United States by the employers who, with one hand, affirmatively defended their workers’ right to work and, with the other hand, pulled the voting lever that eliminated many of the rights and benefits received by illegal workers and their children.

Americans looked for a scapegoat. They blamed Mexicans and other Latinos when, in reality, all they needed to do was check out the contractors who arrived to hire the illegal immigrants “shaping up” each morning at the nation’s Home Depots. Or, even more obviously, they could inspect the status and ethnicity of the labor force that, on the Home and Garden Television network, does the stoop and squat labor required by programs like *Curb Appeal* and *Designer’s Challenge*.

Mexifornia

In December 1997, the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) reported that more than six hundred thousand undocumented work-

ers were living and working in rural America. Farmers relied so heavily on this illegal labor force that they lived in perpetual fear: If anyone ever enforced America immigration laws, the nation's supermarkets' fruit and vegetable shelves would be empty. Luckily, farmers pleading for yet another version of yet another Bracero Program had no cause for concern. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) only devoted 2 percent of its resources to work-site enforcement, largely in the nation's cities. Meanwhile, the Border Patrol spent billions of dollars trying to make a spectacular show of stopping the "brown tide rising." But, in reality, undocumented immigration increased from 3.9 million in 1992 to 5 million in 1996. Farmers—and meat packers and motel owners—did not need to worry. The undocumented labor pool was larger than ever, and the INS never meant to bother the farmers. "Conducting enforcement operations in agriculture is particularly resource intensive," the GAO explained. In addition, the INS lacked the will, and, given its deployments on the Rio Grande, it had exhausted the resources needed to enforce the laws no employer wanted the INS to enforce.⁵¹

A decade earlier, the Reagan administration tried to develop a sane response to legal and undocumented Mexican (and other Latino) migration. When it failed, Reagan or any of his successors could have told the truth about the century-long, total dependence of agricultural employers on Mexican stoop and squat labor. He could have explained that, as Mexicans (and other Latinos) moved to the cities, even more Americans relied on Mexican labor as, simultaneously, more farmers needed to replenish the labor force that just left for the city. Finally, he could have explained that, with two societies so dependent on one another, Mexicans sent home close to ten billion dollars a year in remittances. U.S. banks urgently wanted a piece of this action and had developed a system for loaning big money to Mexican banks, which used as collateral for their U.S. loans the remittances that Mexicans would send in the next year.

Instead of telling the truth, one administration after another boasts about the supposed success of border enforcement. Meanwhile, at the border, coyotes (smugglers) charge more than ever. But, as of 2006, financing now comes—quite often—from relatives *already*

in the United States. What happens is that a U.S.-based relative finds a coyote, makes a down payment for the newcomer, and pays the remainder when the undocumented immigrant arrives in Chicago, Los Angeles, or Houston. In this manner, “delivery is guaranteed, safety is increased, and migrants and their families achieve some protection against fraud.” All the while, one White House after another fails to advertise a simple fact: that coyote money earned in the United States “represents yet another instance of social capital translating directly into U.S. access to build self-perpetuating momentum into the migratory process.”⁵²

The fear of border enforcement, whether real or imagined, does have an effect: many undocumented Mexicans (and other Latinos) simply stay in the United States rather than risk capture. And, to obtain full civil and other rights, many recent immigrants decide to naturalize. Mexico countered that trend with a dual citizenship program, and, as a result, the United States now has more Mexicans than ever, allowing many of those Mexicans to maintain cultural ties to both nations.

In *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming* (published in 2003) Victor Davis Hanson stresses that many of California’s most vocal critics of Mexican (and other Latino) immigration lack a “consistent ideology”; however, they are “sometimes *stunningly hypocritical* in simultaneously hiring illegal aliens and advocating immigration reform” (emphasis added). On the street, Americans want the piñata that only they get to punch. Meanwhile, at the White House, our close analysis of policy-making under Ronald Reagan underlines that the truth makes way for absurd backstage deals celebrating law enforcement rooted in fraudulent documents. Consequently, many uninformed—and well-informed—Americans blame the victim with such ferocity that Congress and the states pass laws that harass and punish the undocumented labor continually sought by all American employers. Mexicans (and other Latinos) become the nation’s internal enemy of choice as too few people analyze an indisputable fact: More Mexicans now live in the United States than ever before. Seal the border tomorrow and more than twenty-five million men, women, and children remain an integral, imaginative part of American life.

Mexicans are not going home. They are home; and their home is our home.

For his part, Hanson worries about Mexifornia. He agrees that Americans exploit Mexicans, yet he wants Mexicans to assimilate into the American way of life. New immigrants represent 40 percent of California's total Mexican population, and, with programs like Chicano studies and dual citizenship, they can sustain easily their old culture in the new one. California turns into a cultural extension of Mexico as Hanson laments "the destruction of the old assimilationist model that integrated my boyhood Mexican friends into an American outlook and expectation." As he remembers the Bracero era, "a sense of humility and balance achieved through comparison with contemporary societies elsewhere, and confidence in our values, measured against a recognition of innate human weakness, framed all such debates about the American experience."⁵³

Robert Nisbet wrote that nostalgia functions as the rust of memory. With the best of intentions, Hanson romanticizes the past as ably as a Norman Rockwell illustration; he also stunningly forgets a past that included economic slavery and segregated Spanish-by-design schools.

We cannot go back. In fact, we were never "there" in the first place. As the Bracero Program made clear, Americans never wanted Mexicans to assimilate. Those Mexicans who tried to do so often failed or, even worse, acted like whites by distancing themselves from blacks. We need to "right" history so that we can have a national debate about immigration rooted in fact. Instead of trying to make Mexicans like us, we should examine how they see themselves and then ask what their assessments portend for the United States of America.⁵⁴

The Pew Foundation's 2002 National Survey of Latinos reported that, on the issue of racial identity, "Latinos clearly indicate that they do not see themselves fitting into the five racial categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau and widely utilized elsewhere." Latinos are *not* White, Black, Asian, American Indian, or Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. Instead, "Latinos were virtually alone in breaking away from the standard racial categories. In Census 2000, Latinos made up 97 percent of the respondents picking the 'Some Other Race' category."⁵⁵

Like the seven million mixed-race Americans (see chap. 7), Latinos reluctantly use the ugly and absurd language of “race” to describe themselves as “some other race.” They become members of a Latino or Hispanic ethnic group, loosely define that made-in-America label as a race, and then emphatically refuse to pass as whites, even if they can do so. The Pew Foundation report indicates that only Cubans (55 percent) offer a majority that sees itself as white. Meanwhile, whether young or old, members of the other Latino groups offer little support for the white identity. Among “all central Americans” only 14 percent accept the white label; the figure for Puerto Ricans is 19 percent, for Dominicans it is 12 percent, and for Mexicans it is 17 percent.

Hanson is correct. Mexicans in particular and Latinos in general do not assimilate into white, American society. However, if they did, would that be a success story? Assuming that white Latinos treat blacks like white Anglos, a successful assimilation sanctions the racial and ethnic status quo. Assimilation could even mean that white Latinos treat Asians, Arabs, and Indians as “nonwhites.” Perversely, white Latinos could become the victimizers of America’s “people of color.”

Assimilation is another dead end. It sanctions white supremacy as it neglects transculturation, the reconfiguration of American society spearheaded by Mexicans throughout the Southwest. In *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, Richard Rodriguez even offers an ideology that moves beyond Chicano. Playing with words, Rodriguez says, “I extol impurity.” He writes about race in America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America.

Rodriguez says that Latinos occupy the passing lane in American demographics because they recognize an obvious fact: Like Cortéz and Malinche, people make love with one another. In 1500 and in 2006, men and women produce children who are ethnic fusions. Indeed, for any Mexican with two eyes, we are all ethnic fusions. “By contrast, white and black discussions of race in America are Victorian; they leave out the obvious part.” Forgetting who made love with whom, whites create and blacks sanction pure categories. They both argue that, when Asians and Mexicans make love, they create mixed-race-children. Finally, after denigrating the human norm of ethnic

fusions, whites and blacks retreat to their two, and only two, thoroughly sanitized ivory towers.⁵⁶

Rodriguez makes a simple request. Destroy the towers, intermingle, and bless the children who, instead of mixtures, are a continuous and imaginative reconfiguration of the only race that exists, the wonderfully “impure” human race.

While Rodriguez intentionally reconfigures beliefs and values, his Mexican contemporaries reconfigure cities and the spaces within them. Almost unnoticed in the criticism of Mexicans is the army of “anonymous heroes” who resurrected dead neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. After the Watts riots in 1965, Mexicans (and other Latinos) transformed many of the worst census tracts. Mike Davis notes that tired, sad little homes saw themselves resurrected. People even used tropical colors, so, instead of paying big money for a trip to the Caribbean or Acapulco, tourists could drive through the streets of Florence-Firestone and get a glimpse of the browns, oranges, and aquamarines that vividly bring life to a formerly dead urban landscape.⁵⁷

This is transculturation at its best. Unfortunately, instead of applauding these efforts, traditional authorities often impede them. Urban planners want white houses with white picket fences. They can ingest Mexican food but not Mexican and Caribbean ideas about the use of public space. For example, one of the most wonderful aspects of cities and towns throughout Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean is their public plazas. In Los Angeles, a firm called Barrio Planners broadcast a simple slogan: “Let a hundred placitas” bloom.” Let the people create public plazas in the middle of one of the world’s most congested cities and let’s see if Mexicans (and other Latinos) can create beauty and a sense of hospitality out of nothing.

It is already happening, even in underground passages. Walk through the tunnel that leads from old-town Sacramento to the modern section, and you can admire an exquisite Mexican mural. The colors light up a dark that proves that, ultimately, it is a matter of our disposition toward the cultural differences that exist and will continue to exist. We can think of the differences as an incredible banquet of cultures. We happily step up to the table and taste and savor whatever we wish. Or, we can argue that Mexican murals are good enough for the

best museums in the world but not good enough for the public spaces of California and the rest of the American Southwest.

The choice is ours, in a society where Chicanos live side by side with Mexicans and Mexican Americans. There is general agreement about race and the color white, but after that the differences among Mexicans (and other Latinos) begin to materialize. Questions of class, education, village, generation, and location in the United States also influence a person's definition of the meaning of Mexican in the United States. We can still create a nationwide sense of community, especially if we use one of the strongest values of Mexican culture, the love of family. We could build on that love by following the Mexicans, who, with Richard Rodriguez, want to recognize "impurity" for what it actually is: a means of welcoming everybody into a great family of civilized human beings.