

14. Latin Americans in North America

By RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

The assumption that cultural diversity would succumb to the pressures of assimilation – that a "melting pot" of modern technology and popular culture would blend all differences – has not occurred, especially where millions of immigrants have made their homes. Writing autobiographically, Richard Rodriguez reflects on family, ethnicity, place, and change in California and America. He raises questions, provides observations, and muses about what it means to be a North American. Though looking to his past, the author suggests what may lie in all of our futures.

Puerto Ricans, Mexicans: Early in this century we were immigrants. Or not immigrants exactly. Puerto Ricans had awakened one day to discover that they suddenly lived on U.S. territory. Mexicans had seen Mexico's northern territory annexed and renamed the southwestern United States. We were people from the South in an east-west country. We were people of mixed blood in a black and white nation. We were Catholics in a Protestant land. Many millions of us were Indians in an east-west country that imagined the Indian to be dead. Today, Los Angeles is the largest Native American city in the United States. On any day along Sunset Boulevard you can see Toltecs and Aztecs and Mayans.

Puerto Ricans, Mexicans – we are the earliest Latin American immigrants to the United States. We argue among ourselves, criticize one another for becoming too much the gringo or maybe not gringo enough. We criticize each other for speaking too much Spanish or not enough Spanish.

Adios was never part of the Mexican-American or Puerto Rican vocabulary. There was no need to turn one's back on the past. Many have traveled back and forth, between rivals, between past and future, commuters between the Third World and First. After a few months in New York or Los Angeles, it would be time to head "home." After a few months back in Mexico or Puerto Rico, it would be time to head "home" to the United States.

In a nation that believed in the future, we were a puzzle. We were also a scandal to Puerto Rico and Mexico. Our Spanish turned bad. Our values were changing – though no one could say why or how exactly. "Abuelita" (grandmother) complained that we were growing more guarded. Alone.

The Americas began with a confusion about maps and a joke about Columbus's mistake. We smile because Columbus thought he was in India. I'm not certain, however, that even today we know where in the world we live. We are only beginning to wonder what the map of the hemisphere might mean.

Latin Americans have long complained that the gringo, with characteristic arrogance, hijacked the word "American" and gave it all to himself – "the way he stole the land." I remember, years ago, my aunt in Mexico City scolding me when I told her I came from "America." Pocho! Didn't I realize that the entire hemisphere is America? "Listen," my Mexican aunt told me, "people who live in the United States are norteamericanos."

Well, I think to myself – my aunt is now dead, God rest her soul – I wonder what she would have thought a couple of years ago when the great leaders – the president of Mexico, the president of the United States, the Canadian prime minister – gathered to sign the North American Free Trade Agreement. Mexico signed a document acknowledging that she is a North American.

We all speak of North America. But has anyone ever actually met a North American? Oh, there are Mexicans. And there are Canadians. And there are so-called Americans. But a North American?

I know one. Let me tell you about him – this North American. He is a Mixteco Indian who comes from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. He is trilingual. His primary language is the language of his tribe. His second language is Spanish, the language of Cortes. Also, he has a working knowledge of U.S. English, because, for several months of the year, he works near Stockton, Calif.

He commutes over thousands of miles of dirt roads and freeways, knows several currencies, two currencies, two sets of hypocrisy. He is a criminal in one country and an embarrassment to the other. He is pursued as an "illegal" by the U.S. border patrol. He is preyed upon by Mexican officers who want to shake him down because he has hidden U.S. dollars in his shoes. In Mexico, he lives in a 16th-century village, where his wife watches blond Venezuelan soap operas. A picture of la Virgen de Guadalupe rests over his bed. In Stockton, there is no Virgin Mary, only the other Madonna – the material girl. He is the first North American.

The latest chapter of the Columbus saga may be taking place right now, as Latin American teenagers with Indian faces violate the U.S. border. The Mexican kids standing on the line

tonight between Tijuana and San Diego – if you ask them why they are coming to the United States of America, they will say they have heard that there is a job in a L.A. dry cleaner's or that some farmer is hiring near Fresno. They insist: They will be returning to Mexico in a few months. They are only going to the United States for the dollars. They certainly don't intend to become gringos. They don't want anything to do with the United States, except the dollars.

But the months will pass, and the teenagers will be changed in the United States. When they go back to their Mexican village, they will no longer be easy. They will expect an independence and an authority that the village cannot give them. Much to their surprise, they will have been Americanized by the job.

For work in the United States is our primary source of identity. There is no more telling question we Americans ask one another than "What do you do?" We do not ask about family or village or religion. We ask about work. The Mexican teenagers will return to the U.S.

Mexicans, Puerto Ricans – most of us end up in the United States, living in the city. The arriving generation is always the bravest. They need to make their peace with isolation, so far from relatives. They learn subway and bus routes that take them far from home every day. Long before they can read English, they learn how to recognize danger, and opportunity. Their lives are defined by change.

Their children or their grandchildren become, often, very different. The best and the brightest, perhaps, will go off to college – become the first in their family – but they talk about "keeping" their culture. They talk incessantly about "culture" as though it were some little thing that can be preserved and kept in a box.

The unluckiest children of immigrants drop out of high school. They speak neither good English nor Spanish. Some end up in gangs – family, man" blood." They shoot other kids who look exactly like themselves. If they try to leave their gang, the gang will come after them for their act of betrayal. If they venture to some other part of the city, they might get shot or they might merely be unable to decipher the freeway exits that speed by. They retreat to their "turf" – three blocks, just like in their grandmother's village, where the journey began.

One of the things that Mexico had never acknowledged about my father is the possibility that my father and others like him were the great revolutionaries of Mexico. They were

pioneers. They left for the United States and then they came back to Mexico. And they changed Mexico forever.

Diplomats talk about a "new moment in the Americas." The Latin American elite have condos in Miami and send their children to Ivy League schools. U.S. and Canadian businessmen project the future on a north-south graph. But for many decades before any of this, Latin American peasants have been traveling back and forth, north and south.

Today, there are remote villages in Latin America that are among the most international places on earth. Tiny Peruvian villages know when farmers are picking pears in the Yakima valley in Washington state.

I am the son of a prophet. I am a victim of history. I am confused. I do not know whether I am coming or going. I speak bad Spanish. And yet I tell Latin America this: Because I grew up Hispanic in California, I know more Guatemalans than I would if I had grown up in Mexico, more Brazilians than if I lived in Peru. Because I live in California, it is routine for me to know Nicaraguans and Salvadorans and Cubans. As routine as knowing Chinese or Vietnamese.

My fellow Californians complain loudly about the uncouth southern invasion. I say this to California: Immigration is a rude act, the leaving of home. Immigration begins as a violation of custom, a youthful act of defiance, an insult to the village. I know a man from El Salvador who has not spoken to his father since the day he left his father's village. Immigrants horrify the grandmothers they leave behind. Illegal immigrants trouble U.S. environmentalists and Mexican nationalists. But they have also been our civilization's prophets. They, long before the rest of us, saw the hemisphere whole.
