

understood that Muslim parents in America felt they needed to preserve many of the old ways.

Fatema would like to be both Afghan and American. "Afghans have integrated instead of assimilated," she explained. "Fremont would be a good example. Afghans have managed to keep their culture and identity. It hasn't been lost in the idea of assimilation. That's when you totally and completely become the culture that you have immigrated to and completely lose your people's original identity. Afghans have kept their uniqueness, the beauty of their culture, and at the same time have thoroughly functioned in today's society. I think that's what integration means."⁵²

Fatema's brother Omar summed up the challenge facing Afghan Americans: "The refugees know that a return to Afghanistan is not in their near future. They will have to change and make do in America."⁵³ Indeed, Afghan Americans, refugees and their U.S.-born children, are "making do": they have begun to sort out and blend old and new cultures and identities. Across generations, they are, in one way or another and to varying degrees, reinventing themselves. They are also helping to change their adopted country, making America a nation of many religions, including Islam.

Beckoned North: Mexico

Joining the newcomers from Russia, Ireland, China, Vietnam, and Afghanistan are 12 million undocumented immigrants, mostly from Mexico.

What should be done about them? Arrest them and deport them to Mexico, argue the opponents of Mexican immigration. Build bigger fences and send troops to guard the border in order to keep them out of America; prohibit them from taking jobs away from American citizens; deny them driver's licenses, access to schools and medical services; and refuse to offer them English-language classes. Tell them to stay home in Mexico. Beneath this nativist clamor is a fear of the "Browning of America," one that can be found not only in television and radio talk shows, but also print news media and anti-immigrant legislation.

Give them "amnesty," answered *Time* magazine in its June 18, 2007, cover story, "Immigration: Why Amnesty Makes Sense." The "Illegals are by their sheer numbers undepotable. More important, they are too enmeshed in a healthy U.S. economy to be extracted." America is "the only industrialized nation with a population that is growing fast enough... to provide the kind

of workforce that a dynamic economy needs. The illegals are part of the reason for that, and amnesty ensures that competitive advantage." *Time* also argued that the Mexican immigrants would eventually be incorporated into the culture of their new homeland. "Assimilation is slow, but inevitable." We must have "faith in America's undimmed ability to metabolize immigrants from around the world, to change them more than they change the U.S."⁵⁴

Like the earlier waves of immigrants crossing our southern border, Mexicans are being pushed by intensifying poverty. But this time it is different. The illegal border crossings from Mexico spiked upward after 1994, the year the North American Free Trade Agreement became U.S.-Mexican policy. Under NAFTA, government-subsidized corn grown in Iowa and shipped to Mexico as cheap corn bankrupted 1.5 million farmers there, forcing them to migrate to the cities and also northward across the border. Free trade has also destabilized the Mexican economy and led to increases in unemployment. "The real, dirty secret of trade agreements is displacement," wrote journalist David Bacon. "During the years NAFTA has been in effect, more than 6 million people from Mexico have come to live in the United States. They didn't abandon their homes, families, and farms and jobs willingly. They had no other option for survival."⁵⁵

Pushed by the need to survive, the migrants have also been pulled by a pursuit of happiness. "Back where we're from it was a very poor community," an immigrant explained. "There was no work there. We just planted corn. So, when we saw that we could not support ourselves, well, we said we have to start looking elsewhere." "Elsewhere" has become "El Norte." "You can see why people go to America," a Mexican stated. "They come back with brand-new trucks, with videos; they have dollars. And it has an impact. You say, 'Wow, there's the good life.'" One of the immigrants recalled that her friend had first migrated to the United States. "She would always write and tell me it was very pretty and that you could live here better. And that people don't have to be very skilled to live better." Women sometimes came alone, or with only their children. "My husband left me," one said, "and there was an opportunity for me to come. I decided to come here because I wanted to try living here, know what it is like here. I saw that it was easy for me, although I had to struggle because it was hard to understand people. But I've struggled for my children more than anything else."⁵⁶

But crossing the northern border is enormously stressful. One of their songs gives an eye-level view of the experience:

*Now boys, to earn lots of dollars,
They left Mexico.
Since they didn't bring any papers,
They crossed as "wire fence jumpers."
They crossed over the hills.
They turned and twisted on the paths.
It was night.
A helicopter searched attempting to find
them,
But with all the bushes, they couldn't see
anything.*

On this side of the border, Mexicans have often had to run across busy freeways, where scores of them have been killed. Signs have been posted: "CAUTION—WATCH FOR PEOPLE CROSSING ROAD." One sign has the word "CAUTION," with a silhouette of a man, woman, and child. Forced by the border patrol to find alternate routes, many of them have died in hot deserts, their bodies rotting in desolate canyons.⁵⁷

The illegal immigrants have kept coming because they know that employers are willing and ready to hire them. Like earlier farm laborers, they are laboring in the fields and orchards of America. Without them, California's agriculture would shut down, warned Senator Dianne Feinstein. There would be sharp increases in the prices of fruits and vegetables, and a revolt by consumers if food costs skyrocketed. At stake, she stated, is the future of California's \$32 billion agriculture industry, with its seventy-six thousand farms and 1 million laborers.

To meet California's need for agricultural workers, President George W. Bush proposed a guest worker program. But his proposal had a definite downside. "Guest workers would have to return home and stay there for up to one year before they would be eligible to come back again," wrote conservative activist Linda Chavez and union leader John W. Wilhelm. "And while working as 'guests,' they would constitute a second class of workers with few rights on the job. It harkens back to the dark period in the 1860s when we admitted tens of thousands of Chinese male laborers to help build our railroads and then prevented them from ever

naturalizing or bringing their families into America. Do we really want to repeat this experiment?"⁵⁸

In order to stop the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico, President Bush sent six thousand National Guard troops to the border in 2006. His action provoked the *San Francisco Chronicle* to issue an editorial entitled "The Border Is Not a Military Zone." "The reality is that he is chasing a mirage that will always be out of reach as long as U.S. immigration policy is detached from reality." Since the early 1990s, the number of border patrol agents has doubled. "The result? There are three times as many illegal immigrants in the United States as a decade ago." One reason is revealed in statistics: "In the early 1980s, half of all undocumented migrants returned home within a year of entering the United States. By 2000 only 25 percent did."⁵⁹

Years earlier, a conservative Republican leader had raised his voice in support of the illegal immigrants. In a radio broadcast in 1977, Ronald Reagan noted the apples rotting on the trees in New England for lack of workers. "It makes one wonder about the illegal-alien fuss. Are great numbers of our unemployed really victims of the illegal-alien invasion or are those illegal tourists actually doing the work our own people won't do?" he asked. "One thing is certain in this hungry world: no regulation or law should be allowed if it results in crops rotting in the fields for lack of harvesters." Nine years later, as president of the United States, Reagan signed the Immigration and Control Act, which gave many illegal immigrants immediate permanent residency—green cards, granted in a fast-track application process for a small fee.⁶⁰

In addition to agriculture, undocumented Mexican immigrants are working in poultry processing plants, garment factories, construction, hotels, and restaurants. They also labor in homes, cleaning houses and babysitting, often being paid extremely low wages. Though the undocumented newcomers usually earn very little money, they rarely seek publicly financed medical assistance, food stamps, or welfare, for fear they will be apprehended and deported. Yet they pay taxes. A 2006 report of the Public Policy Institute of California pointed out that many illegal immigrants pay social security taxes but never collect benefits. A young and working population, they help to subsidize the Social Security retirement program benefiting mainly an aging white population.⁶¹

Individual stories humanize the experiences of these undocumented immigrants. One of them is Carmen Diera Trujillo. "I was

born in a small town called Jerez," she recalled. "I began to work when I was eight years old. Since my family was always short on money, we did not have money to pay for rent and food. So I began to work cleaning houses for the wealthy." At the age of sixteen, Carmen was told by her sister that she would have to go to the United States to work. "I had a boyfriend, and I did not want to leave my friends." But Carmen crossed the border, and initially worked as a housecleaner. "I started my life here living behind closed doors. I was not allowed to leave all week until Saturday. I cleaned the house, took care of the children, and since they knew I had come from Mexico, they would want me to cook Mexican food. They gave me videos, cassettes, and books so that at night I can study English. But since I never went to school, it was difficult to learn English because I did not know how to even write in Spanish."

But Carmen was able to get a Social Security card and began working as a seamstress in the garment factories of Los Angeles. "None of my employers ever asked me for my papers. A lot of employers liked the way I worked so they would look for me whenever they needed to complete a job. I even began to work two shifts because they knew that I was a hard worker. Sometimes it was 2:00 A.M. and I was still in downtown working."

After the enactment of the 1986 immigration law, Carmen was allowed to stay permanently. "I had done my taxes every year since I began working in the garment factories. I had all the papers as proof of being a qualified applicant for amnesty. I always hoped to become legalized since all of my children were already here in the U.S. and they were by birth legal." Though she had no opportunity for schooling in Mexico, she is proud that her children have fulfilled her hopes—a master's degree in school counseling, an emergency medical technician, and two future teachers.⁶²

Camelia Palafox also has an inspiring story. "Ever since I was little," she revealed, "I used to tell myself that I would be a singer. I have always loved music. Everywhere there was a party, I used to sing." Camelia began singing with a small theater group in Tijuana and toured the state of Baja California. "I got a scholarship for being the best actress of all Baja California. The scholarship was a full-paid tuition for study in Mexico City. I remember when I got the scholarship, the theater group director, Professor Orozco, looked at me with a happy and sad face. He was happy for my achievements, but he was upset because he knew that at the time I [was pregnant] with my first child." The father abandoned

the family. "I was eighteen when I had Jose. I worked and took care of my son by myself. I don't regret my decision, but I would have liked to have traveled to Mexico City and see many things there."

After working as a sales clerk in Tijuana, Camelia realized that in order to make more money, she needed to work in the United States. With her sister, she began doing housework in San Diego. "Cleaning houses for one or two days in San Diego would earn us the same amount of money that we would get if we worked in Tijuana for one whole week." The work was hard, and sometimes she was cheated by her employers; at other times she found that men advertising for domestic work wanted "other things and not really housecleaning."

Camelia then started working as a waitress in a Mexican-owned restaurant. "Most of the customers there were Mexicans. Every once in a while *la migrá* [the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS] would arrest a busload of undocumented people. Sometimes they would go undercover and check out the scene. Next thing you knew, people were running all over the place." Camelia was always afraid that she would be arrested and deported. "I felt ashamed that I didn't have papers. I felt inferior. I was scared that I would get put in a van with other people. I felt like we would be treated like animals, as if we were the dogs, and they [the INS] were the dogcatchers." In 1979, Camelia decided that it was time to sneak her five-year-old son, Jose, across the border. "I missed him a lot. It was luck that a friend's husband was able to cross him as a U.S. citizen with no problems at all."

Many years after she crossed the border, Camelia was allowed to stay permanently. She took special classes and passed an examination to qualify her to work in a retirement home. "What I really like about my job is that I'm helping others. I love doing that. I come home from work, and I feel good because I know I did something to help somebody." Reflecting on her life, Camelia said: "Now that I'm a U.S. citizen, I feel a little safer. Also, as a citizen, one can vote and have their voice heard. I also got Jose to get his U.S. citizenship. When I found out that my son had been accepted to UC Berkeley, I was really happy."⁶³

Today, young Mexican Americans are striving to find a place for themselves in the America of their dreams. One of them is Alexis Lopez. In 1950, when his grandfather Juan Frias was seventeen years old, he left his village in Mexico to find work. "During this time," Alexis wrote, "a craze of making it big in the United States

sparked throughout most of the 31 Mexican states." Juan worked in the fields of California, visiting his homeland to get married and have children but returning to the United States to work. In 1976, he decided to make his home permanently in San Francisco and brought his wife and two of his older children. One of them was Alexis's mother, Griselda. After graduation from high school, she worked as a cashier and cook at a Mexican restaurant where she met Leonardo Lopez. Her parents disapproved of Leonardo, but she married him. Though he had been angry, her father finally came around with the birth of Alexis—"Juan's first grandchild and the first real Mexican American."

Alexis has had to navigate between his two identities. "I grew up speaking Spanish because that is the main language my parents spoke at home." But "I also had a television along with Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel teaching me English, along with the English-speaking children at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School." In high school, Alexis joined the Puente Program—an outreach program for educationally and financially underserved Latinos. "This program allowed me to interact with other Mexican American students and to become more college bound. Education was not something that was necessarily promoted throughout any of the generations that came before me. My grandfather worked in the fields of California. My mother spent her childhood in Mexico, and then was taken to the U.S., where she worked and began having children as a young woman. I have the opportunity to do something else, not that it is necessarily better, but different. It is because of these generations that I am able to want something 'more'—that I am privileged to have these opportunities. They came to this country to make a better life and the only thing they would want is for those that come after them, like me, to make them proud."⁶⁴

Alexis knows he is one of a fortunate few among Mexican-American students. In June 2007, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that Latinos have the lowest level of education of any racial group in the state. Just one in seven Latino high school graduates attends college, although they represent 48 percent of all high school students. "At stake is not only the future success of these young people in a job market that increasingly requires a college degree, but the viability of the California economy. If the majority of the state's future population lacks a good education, California will have too few skilled workers to meet the needs of

the information-driven economy and too few middle-class taxpayers to keep the state afloat fiscally as baby boomers retire."⁶⁵

However, Mexican-American students who qualify for college admissions often encounter an additional hurdle. Belonging to families here illegally, they must pay exorbitant out-of-state tuition in many states. Criticizing this policy, columnist Cynthia Tucker wrote: "Having taken advantage of their cheap labor for decades now—eagerly employing them to water our lawns, wash our cars and pluck our chickens—we shouldn't hesitate to make it easy for their children to attend college. It isn't merely a matter of fairness or compassion, but also one of economic self-interest. Any student dedicated enough to learn a new language, excel in high school and start college is going to be successful *somewhere*. It'd rather it be here."⁶⁶

Many of these Mexican-American students participated in the massive demonstrations on May 1, 2006. Facing an exploding racially tinged nativism, Mexican Americans realized they needed to take to the streets, but not in riots. Marching in cities across America, they protested against the draconian anti-Latino legislation pending in Congress. They called their action "A Day Without a Mexican" to send a message to America: the economy needs their labor.⁶⁷

The future for the Mexican newcomers is promising. According to the 2006 U.S. Census figures, 70 percent of California's Mexican population are U.S. citizens. This incline in citizenship is due to births in the United States and also to the recent spike in naturalized citizenship for their parents. About half of the 460,766 Mexican immigrants who became naturalized citizens between 2000 and 2006 were in California. One of them was Roselia Aguilar, a twenty-nine-year-old immigrant who has lived in San Jose for a dozen years and was worried about the backlash against immigrants from Mexico. As she stood with 450 individuals from fifty-seven nations and solemnly took an oath to "bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution," she felt exuberant. "I feel it's one of the most important things that ever happened to me," she said moments after the ceremony. "It's just different. I feel something nice inside me. I feel like I was born again."⁶⁸