

Journal of An Immigrant Border Artist

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Photo courtesy of La Pocha Nostra

I left Mexico City in 1978 to study art in California, “the land of the future” as my lost generation saw it. Too young to be a *hipiteca* and too old to be a *punketo*, I was a 22-year old interstitial rebel, a writer and artist who couldn’t find space to breathe in the suffocating official culture of Mexico. There, the art and literary cartels were structured in an ecclesiastical fashion, accountable to one untouchable capo. He was the archbishop and final arbiter of what was acceptable as “high culture” and “Mexican-ness,” Don Octavio Paz.

In those days, identity in Mexico was a static construct, intricately connected to national territory and language. A Mexican was someone who lived in Mexico and who spoke Spanish like a Mexican. *Punto*. There weren’t many alternative ways of being Mexican. Despite the fact that we came in all shapes, colors and even races, *mestizaje* (the mixed race), was the official dictum and master narrative. The millions of *indios*, the original proto-Mexicans, were portrayed as living in a parallel (and mythical) time and space outside *our* history and society. The paternalistic *indigenista* jargon of the government and the intelligentsia re-

duced indigenous people to infantilized, colorful ethnographic specimens that seemed to be co-sponsored by the Department of Tourism and *National Geographic*. Their photographic image, folklore and traditions were “ours,” but not their misery, joblessness and despair. Not surprisingly, many chose to leave.

Those who dared to migrate *al otro lado* —to the other side— became instant traitors, inauthentic and bastardized Mexicans destined to join the ranks of the infamous *Pochos* who were the other forgotten orphans of the Mexican nation-state. And so, when I crossed the border, I unwittingly started

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my irreversible process of *Pocho-ization* or de-Mexicanization.

When I arrived in the U.S., I innocently engaged in what turned out to be taboo behavior: I began to hang out with Chicanos (politicized Mexican Americans) and to write in Spanglish (the tongue of the *Pochos*) about our hybrid identity that was demonized by both countries —the only identity my generation knew. I found that once you cross the border you could never really go back. Whenever I tried, I always ended up “on the other side,” as if walking on a moebious strip. My ex-*paisanos* on the Mexican side of the line made a

conceptual wall that marked the outer limits of Mexican-ness against the mighty *gringo* otherness.

Neither country understood (or pretended not to understand) the political and cultural significance of the great Mexican migration that was taking place. In its more generous moments, Mexico saw us migrants as helpless *mojados* at the mercy of the INS, and, with a few exceptions, didn’t do much to defend us. Despite the nationalistic jargon of its politicos, Mexico’s hands were permanently tied by loans from the Washington bosses and secret commitments to business partners in the

of resistance. Just to look “Mexican” or speak Spanish in public was in itself an act of political defiance.

If it hadn’t been for Chicanos and other U.S. Latinos, I probably would have died of loneliness, nostalgia and invisibility. Chicanos taught me a different way of thinking about myself as an artist and as a citizen. Through them, I discovered that my art could be developed as a means to explore and reinvent my multiple and ever-shifting identities (something that had been unthinkable in Mexico). Thanks to this epiphany, I began to see myself as part of a larger U.S. Chicano/Latino culture in a permanent process of reinvention. I was no longer a nostalgic immigrant yearning to return to a mythical homeland. I learned the basic lesson of *El movimiento*: I began to live “here” and “now,” to fully embrace my brand-new contradictions and my incipient process of politicization as a much-touted “minority”—to “re-territorialize” myself, as theorists would say.

And so my abrupt process of Chicanization began.

III

For a decade I was asked by Chicano nationalists and hardliners to pay expensive dues and submit myself to thorough identity searches and blood tests. My desire to “belong” far outweighed my impatience and I waited stoically for my “conversion.” During this time I was struck by an existential predicament which caused me to shed many tears, create performances ridden with pathos and engage in obsessive inner questioning: How to ground my multiple repertoires of identity in a country which does not even regard me as a citizen? What are the crucial factors that determine degree of Chi-

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point of reminding me that I was no longer “a true Mexican,” that something, a tiny and mysterious crystal, had broken inside of me forever. After five years of “returning,” in their minds I had forgotten the script of my identity. Even worse, I had “shipwrecked” on the other side (Octavio Paz used this loaded metaphor in a controversial essay that once angered the Chicano intelligentsia).

II

For decades, both the U.S. government and Mexico’s PRI had been immersed in a stubborn chess game of self-defensive nationalisms. Both sides saw the border between them as a straight line, not our moebious strip; a dead-end, not an intersection. For the U.S., the border was the scary beginning of the Dantean Third World, and therefore “the most sensitive zone of national security.” For Mexico, *la frontera* was a

North. The *gringos* conveniently saw us as a primary source of America’s social ills and financial tribulations, especially during tough economic times. To put it bluntly, we were perceived as a bunch of transnational criminals, gang members, drug lords, Hollywood-style greaser bandits and job thieves—and we were treated accordingly. One country was relieved we were gone; the other was afraid to have us. Luckily, since we were Catholic, we accepted our post-national limbo stoically. After all, our goal was not to attain happiness on earth, but simply to make a decent living and send money back to our families in Mexico.

Being a Mexican “alien” in Southern California meant waking up every day and, as an act of volition against all odds, choosing to remain a Mexican. Whether we liked it or not, consciously or not, we became part of a culture

canoization? Time spent as a politicized Mexican in the U.S., or a long-term commitment to *our* grassroots institutions and *causa*? Did I ever become a full Chicano? If so, when exactly did this happen? The day I was busted for talking back to a cop, or the day my father died, and my umbilical cord with Mexico broke for good? Perhaps it happened when my ex-Mexican *paisanos* began to see me as Other?

Today, after 24 years of crossing that bloody border back and forth by foot, by car and by airplane, as I write this I wonder, does it even matter anymore when it happened? As I write this text, I realize that the space between my remote Mexican past and my Chicano future is immense and my identity can zigzag across it freely.

Eventually, it was my art and my literature that granted me the full citizenship denied to me by both countries. I invented my own conceptual country. In the “inverted cartography” of my performances and writings, Chicanos and U.S. Latinos became the mainstream culture, with Spanglish as the *lingua franca*, and mono-cultural Anglos became an ever-shrinking minority (*Waspbacks* or *Waspanos*), unable to participate in the public life of “my” country because of their unwillingness to learn Spanish and embrace our culture.

IV

On January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas staged their legendary insurrection in Chiapas as NAFTA came into effect with its promise of “unifying” Mexico, the U.S. and Canada in a free-trade zone. Bringing the needs of indigenous Mexicans into the national political discussion for the first time, the Zapatistas

effectively used poetic allegories, cyber-communiques and wild performance strategies to broadcast their worldview and effect change. Mexico has never been the same. Nor have U.S.-Mexico relations. The Zapatista lesson was crystal clear: democracy in Mexico could only exist if we acknowledged and incorporated its forbidden diversity, which, in the words of *Subcomandante Marcos*, included not just the indigenous peoples, but also women, gays, youth, and even those on the other side of the national mirror, the Chicanos and “undocumented” Mexicans.

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Zapatismo played an enormous role in the awakening of the *sociedad civil* (civil society) on both sides of the border. It also re-energized the Chicano movement on this side of the border, which was under attack by virulent anti-immigration politicians and cultural backlashers. By 1996, Marcos was practically an honorary Chicano rocker, the avatar of Rage Against the Machine. Many Chicano and border activists, artists and intellectuals, including myself, made the obligatory pilgrimage to the *Chiapaneca* jungle. We were in search of a utopian political site in which to locate our voices and aspirations, but couldn’t find it. Instead, we found yet another Mexico, *el profundo*, one much different from those in the photo albums and distorted memories of our immigrant families, or in the TV shows of Televisa. In this other Mexico, indigenous men and

women were risking their lives on behalf of all the orphans of the two nation states. Seven years later, my heart continues to be with them.

V

NAFTA sponsored several mirages. Among others, it created the illusion that the U.S.-Mexico border was fading away to allow the exchange of products, capital, “global media” and corporate dreams. Unfortunately, the free transit of people and ideas, especially from South to North, and respect for labor, human rights and environmental standards were not part of the original

deal. It was clear that both governments favored open borders going from North to South and carefully supervised borders from South to North. It is no coincidence that along with the implementation of NAFTA we witnessed the construction of a sinister metallic border wall that eerily resembles the old Berlin Wall. This gesture of despotic arrogance coincided with the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and the radicalization of the “English-Only” movement.

The new wall contradicted the borderless rhetoric of the free traders, revealing their true intentions. For the Northern countries, the wealthy ones who invented “the Global Project,” the evil other was no longer the Eastern Bloc; it was now the Southern Hemisphere, especially Latin America and Africa. The unfortunate Immigration Act of 1996 and California’s Propo-

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sition 187 clearly targeted brown and black immigrants, formalizing this new paradigm shift.

Given this backdrop, it became clear to many artists and intellectuals on both sides of the border that what we really needed was a “Free Art Agreement.” From 1995 to 1998, many bi-national cultural initiatives that bypassed government agencies were created on both sides. Our main objective was, to quote from one artists’ manifesto, “an ongoing exchange of thorny ideas, non-commercial artwork and literature across the border.” But it soon became clear that the cultural power brokers on both sides were more interested in the financial benefits and the hype of the “international” art market than in visionary ideas. The border region became an Art Expo.

Of course, the more acid, critical and outrageous voices were left out of the bi-national fiesta. No biggie. We made our own party in the parking lot. We knew the best DJs.

VI

In the year 2000, the opposition candidate Vicente Fox made an appeal to Mexicans living in the U.S. These voters were traditionally anti-PRI, favoring the PRD, a more progressive party. Fox asked us to return and vote in border towns. Many of us went, although there were not enough ballots for us when we got there. Still, we trusted Fox and celebrated his victory. Why? First and foremost, because he

had democratically defeated the 71-year-old PRI, a monumental achievement, bigger, perhaps, than winning the soccer World Cup.

Though Fox came from the corporate right, he began to behave more like a European social democrat. In his first official trip to *El Norte*, he told President Clinton, Prime Minister Jacques Chrétien and then-candidates “Gush and Bore” of his utopian vision of U.S.-Mexico relations: he wanted to create “a tri-national fund” that would eventually equalize the Mexican economy with its northern partners and slowly erase the border; he would reform NAFTA on behalf of Mexican workers; and he especially hoped to guarantee respect for the human rights of migrants. U.S. and Canadian politicians flipped out. Even Chicanos and U.S. Latinos, even I flipped out. Fox’s “border project” sounded like a progressive Chicano activist proposal. The mirror of ideology was suddenly hanging upside down.

Fox’s emotional inaugural speech was even more perplexing than his “border project.” Alone, with little support behind him, and before an audience of adversaries, he promised indigenous peoples that he would implement the sensitive San Andrés Accords. If this weren’t enough, he boldly told the political dinosaurs sitting before him that “no corruption would be tolerated,” and that “the *peces gordos* will end up in jail.” Later on, he even welcomed the *Marcha Zapatista* into Mexico City,

and allowed masked *Comandante Esther* to address the country at the congressional Palace of San Lázaro.

Fox’s multi-ideological stances seemed to announce the beginning of a new, more enlightened era, surgically marked by the beginning of the new century.

VII

In 2001, U.S.-Mexico relations became a priority for both presidents. Or so they said over and over. From a distance, Fox and Bush seemed to be infatuated with one another. Whenever they got together, they behaved like nineteenth-century hacienda owners who loved to chat in each other’s language about boots, cattle, quaint border culture and, of course, *negocios* (business). Both Mexicans and Chicanos were carefully waiting and watching with binoculars as the new *rancheros* in power introduced a series of unprecedented proposals to improve border relations. Perhaps the most outrageous was the “regularization” of three million undocumented Mexicans in the U.S., an unquestionable step in the right direction, but a hard one to believe.

One couldn’t help but ask out loud: Were these *cheros* for real? Did “Jorge” Bush really mean it, or was he trying to appeal to us as part of his greater plan to seduce Latino votes to assure the survival of his party? After all, up to that point the nativist Republicans had been extremely aggressive toward immigrants. What then, was Bush’s secret Mexican agenda? Water, electricity, petroleum. A powerful ally for his “Free Trade Area of the Americas”?

The abrupt transformation of political structures in Mexico proved to be much more complicated than Fox’s good intentions, messianic personality and media savvy combined. Dissent

erupted from all directions. The president was besieged by the passive-aggressiveness of the old PRI constantly stonewalling his new legislation and by the far right in his own party, along with the drug lords and corrupt *judiciales* on whom he had declared war.

Fox was more lonely and sober than ever. His short-lived affair with the citizenry was over, and so were his outrageous promises of instant economic prosperity “for all Mexicans.” To complicate things even more, when the tragedy of September 11 came, the Bush administration shifted its foreign policy 180 degrees toward Afghanistan and “the war on terror.” As the Jetsons carpet bombed the Flintstones, Bush’s Mexican *amigo* faded into the dusty background of a bad Spaghetti Western, and the many border projects concocted by Bush, Fox and Associates were indefinitely postponed.

VIII

Under the pretense of “national unity,” and “national security,” a frightening culture of intolerance, patriotism, paranoia and isolationism has permeated our private and public lives, poisoning even more our already precarious relationship with our neighboring Others. With the country in a state of “maximum alert,” its two borders have been tightened considerably since 9/11; “suspicious (brown) immigrants” are rounded up and kept indefinitely in detention centers, and the *migra* has doubled in numbers and ferocity. The border, once hailed by free traders as the porous gateway for goods and services, is now “the entryway for potential terrorists,” and the “information superhighway” of the past administration, which promised to narrow the gap between cultures and communities,

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is now the largest surveillance system on earth.

IX

In addition to the myriad challenges that President Fox faces in Mexico, he’s got a formidable one on this side of the border: the fulfillment of his promise to develop a respectful, ongoing relationship with the Mexicans and post-Mexicans living in the U.S. who literally sustain the economy of both countries. Like Bush, Fox knows we can no longer be ignored. Despite their self-serving hope that we might be induced to keep their respective parties in power, I truly hope that both presidents and the strange men behind them will soon realize that post-national Mexicans perform extremely beneficial roles for both nations as bi-national brokers and entrepreneurs; informal ombudsmen and diplomats; chroniclers and intercultural interpreters.

But reconciliation won’t be easy. Understandably, we are wary. We’ve been profoundly hurt by the Mexican government’s legacy of abandonment and by a history of institutionalized racism in the U.S., which since 9/11 has become official. Besides, it is clear to most Mexican Americans, even apolitical ones, that the historical relationship between *Los Pinos* and the White House is in some way responsible for us being here.

And so we came, like so many orphans from other countries, seeking the pot of gold at the end of the rain-

bow, only to find hardship, citizen vigilantes and punitive immigration laws. We overcame these obstacles, and in the painful process of becoming Chicanos, or *Americanos* in the widest sense of the Spanish term, we built invisible bridges between past and future, South and North, memory and identity, indigenous America and high-technology, art and politics. And these handmade bridges may be more useful to contemporary U.S.-Mexico relations than the rhetorical ones supposedly built by NAFTA and global media.

Our numbers have only continued to grow. We now constitute an archipelago that spreads from North County San Diego to Homestead, Florida; from East Los Angeles to East Harlem; and from San Antonio to Kodiak Island. We are 20 million post-national Mexicans, acculturated or Chicanoized to varying degrees, and involved, often silently, in every aspect of American culture, economy, and public life. In chorus with at least 15 million other U.S. Latinos, our mere existence demands the creation of a new cartography capable of containing us—a virtual nation in which Latinos, documented or not, can enjoy the same rights and privileges as other “Americans,” an imaginary place, where our contradictions and extreme differences are not just acknowledged or tolerated, but encouraged.

This “other Latin America,” part of the larger Third World within the First, with a population larger than that of

Canada and Australia put together, is currently being co-imagined and drafted by Spanglish poets, hip-hop artists, fusion musicians, radical scholars, performance artists and independent filmmakers.

In the year 2002, both the U.S. and Mexico's monolithic visions of nationhood are being confronted by multiplicity, hybridity, tolerance, and *autogestión ciudadana* (citizen self-organization), direct products of the border wound. It is the new South reminding *El Norte*, and the new North warning *El Sur*, in Spanglish and from the grass roots up, that no democratic vision of the future can be fully realized without including the Other—which, it turns out,

is no longer so “other.” As ghost citizens of a borderless nation, we may soon have to redefine the meanings of a long list of dated twentieth-century terminology. Words such as “immigrant,” “alien,” “foreigner,” “minority,” “diaspora,” “border,” and “American” may no longer be useful to explain our new condition, identity and dilemmas.

X

Two years ago, when Mexico and the U.S. finally allowed “dual citizenship” for the first time ever, many colleagues and I decided to apply. We hit the jackpot. We exchanged our green card for a gold one, and went from being partial, incomplete citizens in Mexico and

the U.S. to becoming full citizens in both countries. Our rationale for applying was that if our two countries were engaged in a seductive rhetoric of “free exchange,” it was only logical that all Mexican Americans should become dual citizens, and vote in both countries (what a scary thought, *¿qué no?*). It was only logical that we should demand to be treated as true partners in the project of imagining a more enlightened future for both countries.

For the moment, the image in the mirror is frozen. I am extremely scared about Bush's and Ashcroft's notions of America and “homeland.” “Their” cartography seems to have very little room for “us.” **VM**



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