

THE INCONSTANT BORDER

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Those of us who reside in Santa Barbara live on a kind of border, vacillating between Latin and Anglo America, the First World and the Third, English and Spanish, and Catholic and Protestant. This was once a Chumash fishing village that became a Spanish, then Mexican pueblo. After the Anglos came someone got the bright idea to promote the mission style of architecture and start an Old Spanish Days Fiesta. So the city has a distinctly Mexican feel about it. If you listen to the radio stations and languages, you will hear English and Spanish spoken here.

Santa Barbara is part of the frontier between Mexico from the United States, although sometimes the borderline runs north and south, separating the affluent coastal people from the "Inlanders."¹ Although the official border is 200 hundred miles away near San Diego, some consider it a mere fiction, an imaginary line drawn in the sand. Where does it end and where does it begin?

There are colonies of Californians living in Baja taking advantage of lower housing costs, just as there are colonies of people from Michoacan and Zacatecas living in California. When growers in the San Joaquin Valley need workers to pick its crops, Mixtecos from Oaxaca are here to do the dirty work. Likewise, American assembly plants are positioned in Tijuana and Mexicali to take advantage of cheap labor. Certainly, multinational corporations do not respect borders; just look at all the jobs going to India, Pakistan, and Central America.

California is so dependent upon Mexican labor the economy would nose dive if Mexican labor were to dry up, which was the premise of a 2004 film, "One Day Without a Mexican." What would happen to California if all the Mexicans were to disappear? One out of every three Californians is of Mexican or Latin American origin. And if you look at the

¹ "Inlanders" are people who live east of the coast, in the less affluent parts of California. Currently the highest rate of foreclosures due to the collapse of the housing market occur there.

makeup of students in Santa Barbara's primary schools, you realize that the future belongs to Latinos. Mexican author Carlos Fuentes jokingly calls it "genetic imperialism."²

We also share common problems. If the wastewater treatment plants in Tijuana break down, raw sewage washes up on the pristine beaches of San Diego. And when addicts in Oakland need a fix, smugglers in Sinaloa are willing to accommodate them. One hundred years ago people went back and forth from Mexico to the U.S. at will, and even though the border is more difficult to cross since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, smugglers find new and innovative ways to ferry people to the Promised Land. As long as there are jobs, they'll keep coming.

While Americans eat more Mexican cuisine and salsa has replaced ketchup as the national condiment, people in Mexico City flock to McDonalds and shop at Wal-Mart. American-style Halloween has become very popular in Guadalajara, while Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations have taken hold in San Francisco. The Mexican middle class puts their money in U.S. banks as a hedge against inflation of the peso, while American banks have lent billions to Mexico to finance the foreign debt.

So does this mean that California is going to become a part of Mexico again? That Spanish will become the dominant language and people in Santa Barbara will actually pronounce the street names correctly?

It would be very ironic. After all, Anglo immigration in the 19th century to the Mexican northwest was in many ways illegal. And the "illegal aliens" of that time day forcibly took half the national territory of Mexico to satisfy their thirst for Manifest Destiny.

So, it should come as no surprise that a century and a half later Mexicans are once again returning to California, to the cities their forefathers named after the angels and saints.

² "Genetic imperialism" refers to the high birth rate and increase of immigration from Latin America. Also, the white population has a much lower birth rate, thus California is rapidly becoming a majority Latino state like Texas and New Mexico.