



The Other Face of America

**Jorge Ramos**



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# THE OTHER FACE OF AMERICA

CHRONICLES OF  
THE IMMIGRANTS  
SHAPING OUR FUTURE

JORGE RAMOS

 HarperCollins e-books

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FOR ALL THOSE FORCED TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY WHERE THEY  
WERE BORN....

FOR ALL THOSE WHO HAVE HAD TO BEGIN THEIR LIVES AGAIN....

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The collapse of walls to let people out has given rise to new walls to keep people out.

**LEOPOLDO ZEA**

Ethnicity seems to be destiny in the politics of the third century [of American Democracy].

**HAROLD EVANS, *THE AMERICAN CENTURY***

The United States is a multiracial, multicultural country... This is the great historical challenge of the United States.

**OCTAVIO PAZ**



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# CONTENTS

Epigraph	iii
Acknowledgments	ix
New Introduction to the Paperback Edition	xi
Introduction	xxi
<b>FROM THE SOUTH TO THE NORTH: STORIES OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS</b>	1
1 The Border	3
2 Amelia and San Guivi	10
3 Falsifying the Future	19
4 A Day without a Mexican	23
5 Aspen for the Undocumented	27
6 Matamoros, New York	31
7 The Raid	35
8 Nannies	39
9 The Reconquest of California	45
10 The Indispensable	49
11 From Chicago with Skepticism	53
12 The Betrayal (or How the Votes of 10 Million Mexicans Were Stolen)	56
13 Angel, "The Discriminated One"	60
14 Heliodoro's Letters	64
15 The Mexican Girl Who Wrote to President Clinton	68

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<b>WE COME FROM EVERYWHERE</b>	71
16 Elián: His First 150 Days in the United States	73
17 Cuba Entrenched in Miami	107
18 Lázaro: A Dissident in Exile	111
19 Central Americans: From Wars, Laws, and Hurricanes	115
20 Vieques and What It Means to Be Puerto Rican	123
21 Puerto Dominicans and New Dominicans	129
22 The New Colombian Exodus	135
23 The Muddy Shoes of Venezuela	141
<b>LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES</b>	147
24 Nostalgia, Aromas, and Tacos	149
25 The Call	151
26 The Rediscovery of Hispanics	153
27 California Is the Future	160
28 Loretta and the Voters' Revenge	164
29 Accomplices of the Undocumented	168
30 The Labyrinth	172
31 The <i>Metedólares</i>	175
32 What Immigrants Contribute to the United States	179
<b>RACISM</b>	183
33 Julian Samora and the Dogs	185
34 John Rucker—Face-to-Face with a Racist	187
35 How to Kill an Immigrant and Get Away with It	193
36 Video Justice	196
<b>SPANGLISH</b>	199
37 Long Live Spanglish!	201



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38 The Future of Spanish in the United States	206
39 The Spanglish Professor	210
<b>THE AMERICAN DREAM</b>	215
40 Why Marta Wants to Leave Mexico	217
41 Soccer Children	220
42 La Vida Loca	224
43 Chef Cristino	228
44 The American Dream—Mexican Style (or María Amparo’s <i>Santitos</i> )	230
<b>OUR FUTURE</b>	235
45 Am I an Immigrant, <i>Papá?</i>	237
46 Amnesty	239
47 July 1, 2059	246
<b>EPILOGUE</b>	
Where Are They Now?	249
About the Author	
Praise	
Cover	
Copyright	
About the Publisher	



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The United States has given me opportunities that Mexico could not. I left Mexico because of censorship in the press, because of the lack of political and economic choices, because I did not believe in its leaders, and because from there it would have been almost impossible for me to find my place in the world. Strangely enough, the longer I am away from Mexico, the more Mexican I feel. I didn't really want to be an immigrant; but I had to become one, and I found a country ready to welcome my passions and to rechannel the pent-up energy of my frustrations. My gratitude to the United States is enormous—gratitude for not allowing me to get stuck in the present and for giving me a push toward the future.

What really saved me in my new life as a Mexican immigrant in the United States, however, were certain individuals. Shawnese Colaw let me sleep in the living room of his tiny apartment hours after I landed in Los Angeles the night of January 2, 1983. Thank you for the warmth, the shelter, and my first English lessons.

Marco Mendoza lent me a hand when my checkbook was lean. If

it hadn't been for him, I would have returned to Mexico bearing the burden of my failure. Marco gave me the time I needed to get back on my feet. Marco is no longer with us, and I don't know how to repay him.

Without even knowing me, Pete Moraga gave me my first job in U.S. television. I still wonder why he did it. Pete, a thousand thanks.

Then there are my supporters.

I have always suspected that my family never understood all the reasons behind my leaving Mexico. I don't really know how to justify those two decades away from Lourdes, my mother, and Lourdes, my sister and confidante, and Alex, Eduardo, and Gerardo, my brothers and cardinal points. During the adventure I even lost my father. But I feel as close to him as if I had left yesterday.

Lisa, Paola, and Nicolás teach me every day what is important in life. They know that in this subject, I will always be a student.

My great friend Benjamin Beckhart, who for twenty-five years never failed to ask: How are you? Ben, I will always thank you for your question, but especially for your patience, affection, and understanding in listening to my response.

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What more can I ask?

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## NEW INTRODUCTION TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

An obstacle to understanding how important immigrants are in the United States lies in the fact that much of the information we get is incorrect.

So many times I have heard people say, "There are already too many immigrants in this country." A perfect example of this is an enormous and xenophobic billboard in New York announcing that "America is full." The truth is only 11 percent of the people who live in the United States are foreign-born. This percentage is much lower than the percentage of immigrants that streamed into the United States between 1890 and 1930, for example, when almost 15 percent of the population were foreigners. Perhaps the current stigma concerning immigrants is blatant discrimination. Back then, immigrants were European, not Latin American. Inevitably, one can only discern the American attitude toward the recent influx of Latin American immigrants as a form of racism, which is permeated by an ignorance as to how enormous the cultural and economic contribu-

tions these very same *brown* immigrants have on all things American.

In the past months, and for different reasons, I have participated in several TV debates with the ex—presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, who believes that Latinos are invading the United States and killing the “West” and “American Culture.” However, I now understand that, deep down, Pat Buchanan and his peers are simply afraid of immigrants like me, and of the change we represent to their world. Their world—white, exclusive, dominant—is disappearing, leaving the door open for my world: mixed, brown, inclusive.

Our threat to how culture functions in America and the negative reaction to our very existence, which I once was stagnatingly frustrated by and am now only fueled by, is what I now consider to be a product of the small minds and opinions of a very vocal few.

America is evolving.

This positive upswing in attitude continues to grow. America is experiencing a shift in feeling: from one that at first exuded rejection, then to a form of complacency, and now embodies embracement, even acceptance. A positive attitude toward recently arrived immigrants has begun to filter into the minds of many Americans, which I can’t help but hope is the very essence of this *American Spirit* we were all drawn to when first dreaming of living in this country.

There still might be a long way to go, but I see a hopeful spark emerging from those around me, and with it a strong sense of optimism, which has begun to entrench itself in America’s immigrant community. In the dark days of a very uncertain world climate, this spark, however small, means much more than anyone can realize. Might we, the new immigrants, be the future heart and soul of this great country? Immigrants wanting to begin again, start new lives, look ahead, and erase the past, building futures and generations of grateful children and homes brimming with the optimism the United States has always been known for is what this country can expect. Will those from Mexico and Honduras, the Dominican Republic and Argentina, embody tomorrow’s view of what it means to be American? Of course they will.

Alarmists say that the United States is at risk of becoming a divided and unbalanced nation. Nonsense. Yes, Hispanics are culturally reconquering and physically reoccupying California and Texas, but does this mean that a separatist movement exists? Not at all. A separation from a past, particularly a latter twentieth century, filled

with mistakes and regret, and the obvious growing pains of a nation whose sense of self was confused and sometimes blind, is healthy. From the racial discord felt before and during the Civil Rights movement, to the misdirected bloodshed during the Vietnam War, to our shaky footing as the sole superpower of the world, America has had much self-sorting to do.

Immigrants, combining the complexity of why they have chosen to leave home for a better life here with the simplicity of logic it took to undertake such a task will, I believe, save America from itself. After all, isn't creating a better life for oneself and your family, in the simplest terms, what life is about? Immigrants in America certainly think so.

LATINO IMMIGRANTS ARE transforming the face of the United States. Earlier this year, Latinos became the largest minority in the United States, a fact that has both immediate consequences and long-term benefits. The rise of Hispanics who live in this country really is a demographic revolution, silent and unstoppable. The Hispanic population increased by 58 percent between 1990 and 2000, and today there are over 40 million of us (if we add the millions of undocumented immigrants to the 37 million Hispanics reported in early 2003 in the *New York Times*).

More interesting, the Hispanic population is no longer limited to certain areas of the country. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, between 1980 and 2000 the amount of Latinos increased by 1,180 percent in Raleigh, by 995 percent in Atlanta, by 859 percent in Orlando, 630 percent in Nashville, 437 percent in Portland, and 303 percent in Tulsa. Hispanics no longer live *only* in rural areas or urban enclaves: 54 percent of Latinos now live in the suburbs. There is no place in the country where Latin American culture is not felt or where Spanish is not spoken.

When I arrived in the United States, some twenty long years ago, the news director of a local television station said to me that Spanish was going to disappear because all Latino immigrants—as had happened before with Italians, Polish, and German immigrants—will become assimilated and they will all speak English. This hasn't happened yet. On the contrary, Spanish is alive and well, with more and more people speaking it in the United States.

Spanish is so important today that it is quite difficult for a politician to be elected in certain districts of California, Texas, Florida, Arizona,

Illinois, New Mexico, and New York if the candidate doesn't speak Spanish. And no one needs to be reminded of our current president, George W. Bush, and his nominal command of a form of Spanish.

So why is it that Spanish-language speakers are so often rejected? The fear that fuels the rejections comes from prejudice. Again, as far as we have come, and as much as I do feel somewhat more embraced as an immigrant, there is still a long, long way to go.

To speak Spanish and English is like using both hands. This is how the Puerto Rican writer, Rosario Ferré, describes it. And I completely agree: To speak both languages allows me to read Hemingway in English and García Márquez in Spanish. I can cheer for ballplayer Barry Bonds or be riveted by Mexico's advancement in soccer's World Cup. I can listen to Britney Spears and Madonna, as well as Shakira and the band Maná. In other words, to be bilingual means that I have a view of the world that doubles my ability to learn and know what, where, and who is at the forefront of any one thing. Being bilingual makes one precious to today's society. And as much as I think I reap the benefits, it will be my children, American born, who will doubly out-craft me and flex their knowledge of two cultures and languages, reaping twice as many benefits as I ever could.

It's true, sometimes the mixing of Spanish and English can create barbarisms. Not too long ago, a friend of mine told me that his car had been *lisiado* (from the English verb to lease). Even though in Spanish this verb means to be crippled, I found it both absurd yet culturally wonderful that using this phrase communicated to me exactly what he meant, and that only a person who could speak both English and Spanish could've known what he meant. It is the bicultural, as well as bilingual code of what it means to be Hispanic in America. And it is this code that, perhaps hysterical to some and abhorrent to others, foretells the future language of our society.

Twenty-seven states have declared English the official language in the United States. However, these are signs of resistance in the face of the inevitable. If the flow of immigrants coming from the south and the birth rates in Hispanic families continue to be what they are today, in less than fifty years the number of Spanish speakers in this country will most probably reach 100 million. Another sign of how important immigrants, and the culture they bring, are to the United States.

Americans should not be startled by the growth of the Latino population and its ability to maintain certain customs and traditions,



such as speaking Spanish and inventing Spanglish. Latinos are assimilating into American culture easy enough. In little time, they have attained more education, reached better salaries, and, according to a study conducted by the University of Southern California, they will also (surprise!) learn English.

The contribution of Hispanic immigrants to the United States reveals itself in more ways than just food, music, and language. It comes in hard cash. Immigrants pay billions of dollars in taxes. According to the National Academy of Sciences, all immigrants, both legal and undocumented, contribute more than \$10 billion every year to the American economy. According to the National Immigration Forum Organization, on average each immigrant pays \$1,800 a year on top of what they receive in services and benefits from the federal, state, and local governments. Immigrants, like America's natural born citizens, pay to live in this country.

Also, UCLA's North American Integration and Development Center estimated that the "current levels of undocumented migration from Mexico (three million workers) represents a contribution of \$154 billion to the gross domestic product of the United States, including \$77 billion to the gross state product of California. Contrary to popular belief, undocumented immigrants do not come to America to siphon services. They do not choose to leave their beloved countries of origin for the United States in order to sponge off governmental social services. They come here to work. If there is one thing you will find in the immigrant community, it is an insatiable hunger to work, legitimately, and to provide for their families. If more people realized this, I know that acceptance of immigrants living in this country would proliferate at a blinding pace.

What's more, if we put aside dollars, immigrants are even willing to spill blood for this country. During a crisis, immigrants will defend the United States as if it were their birth country. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I was not surprised to see American flags waving from the heavily Hispanic areas of Hialeah, Florida, Pilsen in Chicago, the Bronx, New York, and in East L.A. I heard of people—not all of them legal residents—who were willing to sign up as volunteers to join the American army. And, as has been the case in most wars America has participated in, a large percentage of soldiers who fought in Afghanistan and are leaving for the new crisis in Iraq are named Salinas and Pérez and Rodríguez. These soldiers are the

sons and daughters of immigrants who have instilled in them a sense of debt to this country and what it provided and continues to provide for them and their family. Americans need to know this. It is the intent of this book to help guide them toward this realization, on a personal level, by encouraging them to pay closer attention to the individuals who, chances are, live in their very neighborhoods.

ONE OF THE first ideas President Bush had after the terrorist attacks in September 2001 was to split the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in two. One part would take care of border protection, and the other would take care of all bureaucratic issues. But regardless of the merits of such a proposal, what we need more than anything is the certainty that *without* an immigration agreement between the United States and Mexico first, and then with the rest of Latin America, there will be no control whatsoever over America's southern border.

It's amazing how quickly attitudes change. One week before the terrorist attacks, President Bush said, "The United States has no more important relationship in the world than our relationship with Mexico," and he promised President Vicente Fox that he would look for ways to legalize three and a half million undocumented Mexican immigrants. Soon after that, the immigration issue ceased to be a priority for the White House and Congress.

Yet, with or without amnesty, immigrants continue to arrive and continue to affect the way Americans live. Overwhelmingly for the better.

Contrary to what is widely believed, this is the most appropriate moment to grant amnesty or legalize the immigration status of over 8 million undocumented immigrants in this country. This would allow us to identify and locate people who, in theory, do not exist on paper and are completely invisible to U.S. intelligence agencies.

It isn't such a crazy idea.

The settlement of an immigration agreement between Mexico and the United States is urgent. Every year, over 300 immigrants die while attempting to cross the border illegally. (In 2001 there were 322 deaths.) But over 320,000 make it safely to the other side. An immigration agreement would allow for the flux of immigrants to take place in safe, controlled, and regulated conditions. I recognize that right now there is little political interest in granting amnesty, but taking into account the larger picture demands that we do. History has taught us to deal with current problematic policy situations by

attempting to understand issues that may arise in the future. I fear that if we don't deal with the immigration situation sensibly and with a revised look at our policy, without the knee-jerk reaction many have to simply shut our borders down (both unrealistic and ultimately horrible for the United States), we will experience catastrophe, both economically and culturally.

THIS BOOK IS a simple series of brief chronicles of the immigrants who are (politically, socially, culturally, demographically, and economically) changing the United States. Nothing else. It does not intend to center itself on domestic policy, but rather is meant to show what life in America is truly like, for millions. I wrote what I saw, and many times I felt compelled to voice my opinion. To me, those who I met demanded I do so.

These chronicles reflect—or so I hope—the other face of America: a hidden, fearful, persecuted face that is nevertheless vital to this country's growth and fundamental to the multicultural path the United States has set for itself. Each chapter discusses the heterogeneous groups that constitute the Hispanic community living within the United States. In no way does this book intend to address the entire spectrum of issues, which the Hispanic community as a whole must contend with. I wanted to show a sliver of what many immigrants go through in the United States so that those who know nothing on the subject could understand just what millions live through, daily. These millions are the immigrants who still remain to many, despite my best efforts, invisible.

Whoever is looking for a manual on policy, or a thorough academic analysis on Latin American immigration into the United States, will be disappointed. This book is about people. It is about those who, daily, must confront, challenge, navigate, and pray their way through a dark maze specifically set up so they won't survive. Yet they do. And they prosper.

This book contains information and statistics that provide the context for one of the most important phenomena the United States has gone through. The immigration wave, which occurred in this country throughout the '90s, made immigration a front-burner topic. Even in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy, it remains an issue that, if ignored, will result in disastrous damage to the social harmony of this country.

In this book I express my opinions. I do so because, more than a journalist, I am a person who identifies, perhaps far too closely, with those I interviewed. I too had gone through what many of the individuals I spoke with are going through, and at times I could not contain my rage. The pages within this book reflect this. I'm not ashamed to admit it.

I did not hide my sympathy and compassion for those who are changing the face of this country. Never did I shy away from maintaining my opinion on the rights, or lack thereof, of those I interviewed; nor did I veil my reportage with bias. Again, I wrote as I saw and expressed what I thought, agreeable or not. I have too often seen the voice of immigrants in this country hidden behind those who, in trying to objectively convey a story, ignore their belief of right and wrong and let those who they may otherwise help suffer. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do more. A journalist is, after all, still human. And a journalist who is also an immigrant can be one opinionated person.

After the publication of this book in hardcover I received much criticism. Not only because I have made it a point to defend immigrants, but also because there were many who expected this book to be something it was not, nor ever pretended to be. Nothing about covering immigrants in this country is simple. Emotions get in the way. Tempers flare. Instead of writing a book with policy innuendo and political analysis, I intended to write a book people could understand. A book that easily shows the depth of those in this country who cannot stand up for themselves for fear that if they do, they will be pried away from their homes, their lives, and those they love. Even more importantly, they would be taken away from their idealistic notion that living in this country is an honor, and the pride they feel because they do so is something they cannot live without.

Some said that if it were not because I was seen nightly on television, this book would not have been published. To a certain degree, I suppose they're right. But many detracted from the stories included in this book because of my public persona, and this is a notable shame. My being well known throughout the U.S. Latino community did more to help me gain access to stories and people who otherwise would never say anything to anyone. Also, these detractors forget that I too am an immigrant, and my relating to those I interviewed was integral to the process of my showing just who the millions of people living illegally in this country are.

When an undocumented immigrant tells me the story of his life—how he crossed the border, how much he paid a *coyote*, where he lives, what his fears are, and what he expects from his stay in the United States—he does so with a secret hope that I may have even the remotest chance to help change his situation, or the situations of others like him. Contrary to what many might imagine, it is my work on TV that has allowed me to discover and tell many of the stories that appear in this book. It is a bridge, not an obstacle, and one I would have gladly crossed over and over.

It is also interesting to note what a different response the book got from a non-Latino audience, compared to a Latino one. When *The Other Face of America* was published in Spanish in the United States in the fall of 2000, many immigrants saw themselves in the stories I told. They would say, “That happened to me,” “I saw that once,” or “I know someone who went through what you show in the book.” The book tour, which took place in L.A., Miami, Houston, Texas, Chicago, and New York, offered one confirmation after another of the immigrant experience—either legal or undocumented—in the United States. This book is a view from the inside. The English edition of the book, published toward the end of 2001, received a wholly different reception. It was a reception from an immigrant’s *outside*, and this showed.

When this book was published, the September 11 tragedy was still very fresh in everyone’s mind, and the possibility of an earlier proposed amnesty for millions of undocumented immigrants had vanished overnight. That fall of 2001 was perhaps the most anti-immigrant period in America’s recent history. Knowing just who lived inside this country was difficult to accept. It was difficult to accept that the vast majority of the undocumented who live in the United States are hardworking, law-abiding, even patriotic individuals who want nothing more than what most American citizens want: a solid life, with the freedom to travel wherever they wish, and an opportunity to become whatever they want to in life. I hope that with this edition, timing and attitude will work positively in showing what I have intended. That to be an immigrant is to be courageous. To be an immigrant is to acutely understand a sense of loss and triumph. To be an immigrant is the first step we all must take in becoming an American.



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## INTRODUCTION

I am an immigrant  
In a country of immigrants;  
And the place where I live looks more and more like me.

Everything was changed on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center was destroyed. The day was a disaster for immigrants especially, and for many years an anti-immigrant zeal will be felt. On that day, the way many in America view immigrants was changed. Forever.

For the past few months, even years, prior to that day, we in America experienced a renewed sense of optimism toward immigrants and immigration policy—the immigrant's role as a worker and contributor to American culture was recognized as integral to what makes America what it is. Sadly, this view has ceased, and through this terror and tragedy, we have emerged with a new view of immigration that ultimately will hurt more than protect the country.

The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center erased some of the things that have transpired, transforming the spirit of welcome into one of suspicion. This I find saddening. Everything that we as immigrants have worked so hard to establish has been lost. Every little gain, every little step, has been erased, changing the attitude on immigration to sentiments not felt in America since the Communist witch-hunts of the 1950s.

We have gone from discussing the beginning of a new dawn in partnership between the United States and foreign nations to discussing the possibility of closing our borders in order to guard against future terrorist incidents.

So much work has gone into erasing the concept of an “us and them” mentality between Americans and immigrants that it is a shock to see all this work collapse just as quickly as the 110-story buildings did on September 11.

With so many immigrants having worked hard to become American citizens, it is a shame that the sentiment of American patriotism within the immigrant community has been called into question. Immigrants are American patriots, and many will, and do, sacrifice their lives for the rights and opportunities this country has provided. American citizenship has given many immigrants and their families the opportunity to fulfill countless dreams. From Cubans to Central Americans to Mexicans, American citizenship is a privilege worth the sacrifice of life. It is hard to imagine people questioning this loyalty and exuberance. Even more, it is hard not to feel angry about it.

As a reporter, I’ve covered three wars. I have never seen anything like what I’ve seen in downtown Manhattan since September 11. The concentration of rubble and death was horrific, and two months later, it still is; I’m sure the experience will plague me for the rest of my life. I’m not alone in this feeling. America itself has changed. Yet the view toward America from immigrants who want nothing more than to feed and clothe and educate their children remains intact and as strong as ever. To most, America is still the country where human rights, opportunity, and success are possibilities; it inherently inspires hope in those who want nothing more than to make their contribution. I hope and pray that previously planned improvements in immigration policy are not forgotten, and even more, I hope and pray that immigrants themselves are seen not as a problem in America, but rather a solution. We will see.



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