

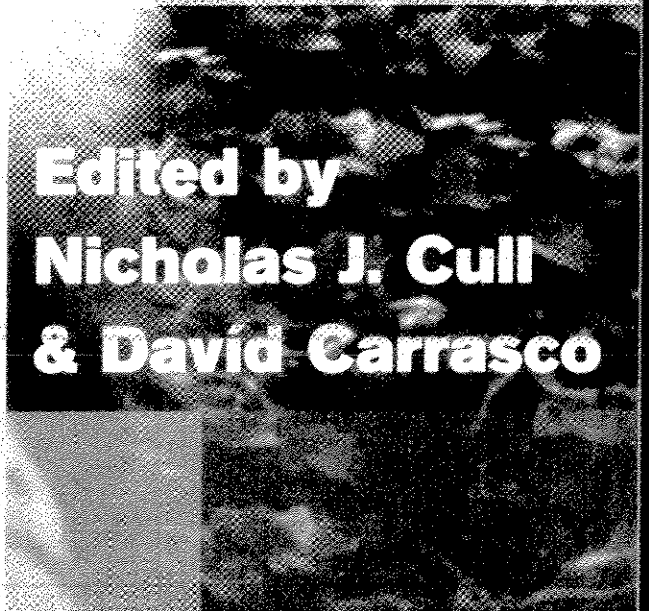
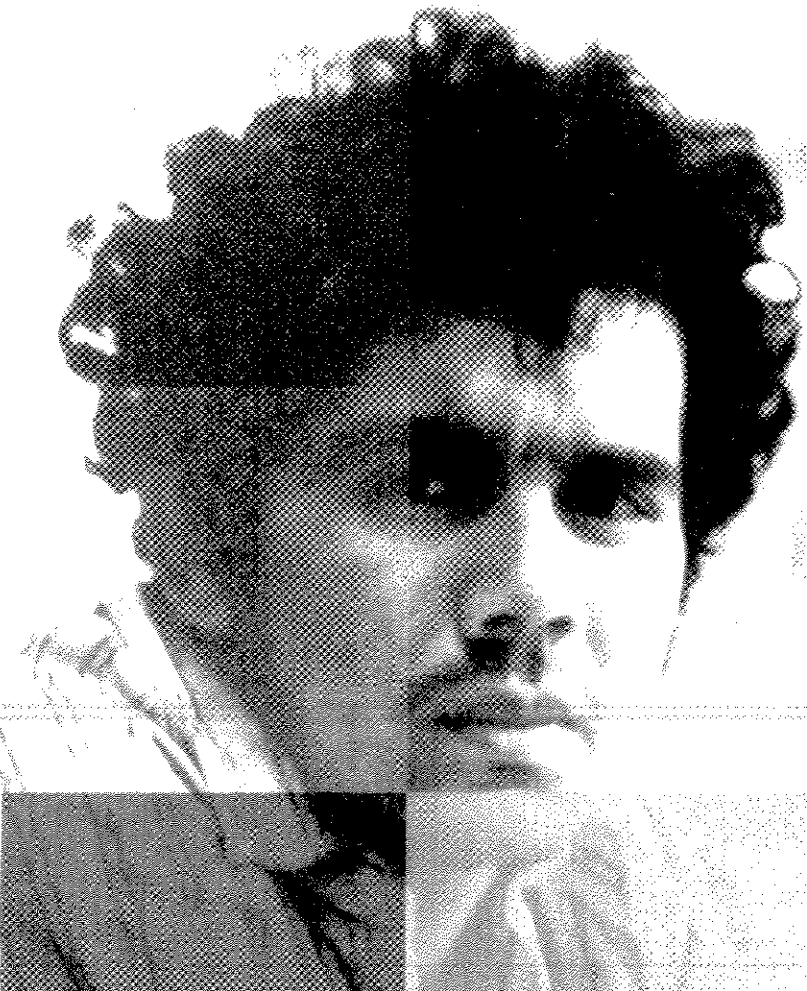
# Alambriستا

AND THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER



**Film, Music,  
and Stories of  
Undocumented  
Immigrants**

**Edited by  
Nicholas J. Cull  
& David Carrasco**



## Chicano Studies ■ Film

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Robert M. Young's critically acclaimed 110-minute film *Alambrista: The Director's Cut* depicts the harsh realities of Mexican life on both sides of the border. Following the birth of his first child, a young Mexican slips across the border into the United States in search of the American dream for himself and his family. He finds heartbreak, exploitation, and disappointment, but also friendship, affection, and help along the way.

First released in 1977, *Alambrista* received critical praise and a number of awards, including a *Camera d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival. For the University of New Mexico Press release, a distinguished group of scholars has packaged a new director's cut of the film with a book of essays devoted to immigration and the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. These scholars include Albert Camarillo, Richard Griswold del Castillo, Daniel Groody, Teresa Carrillo, Howie Movshovitz, Bill Ong Hing, José Cuellar, Cordelia Candelaria, and the editors.

The director's cut includes new scenes, an improved soundtrack with a totally new musical score by "Dr. Loco and Los Tiburones del Norte," English subtitles, and interviews with the director and other participants. Also included with the book and DVD is an enhanced CD of the soundtrack.

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# The Drama of Immigration and the Cry of the Poor

The Voices of *Alambrista* Yesterday and Today

Daniel Groody

## Introduction

Immigration is a worldwide phenomenon that affects every nation and every neighborhood in the world. Nowhere is this truer than in the United States, which is a country of immigrants. In recent years, one of the greatest waves of immigrants to land in the United States is the Mexican. The movie *Alambrista* helps us look more closely at the trials and tribulations associated with Mexican immigration by entering into the particular life of one immigrant, named Roberto. Throughout the movie, various characters bring to light the complex drama of the movement from one country to another. Some of these characters are placed at center stage, some enter briefly and then recede into the background, and still others play a minor role in the movie but a major role in shaping the conditions of immigrants in America today. Each character plays an important role in the movie because each one prototypes an element of the narrative of millions of Mexican immigrants who live this story each day.

In this article I would like to examine the characters of *Alambrista* in light of the stories of undocumented Mexican immigration today. Each person in the film has something important to say, and he or she brings out the cries of the poor who are struggling to be heard in contemporary American society.

My purpose is to identify these voices more clearly, to listen to their struggles and to reflect on the implications of their voices. The voices in this article do not come from Hollywood actors or fictional characters but actual human beings who have gone through the immigration experience from Mexico to the United States.<sup>1</sup> They bring out more clearly what is happening on the “inside” of the immigrant, that is, what they hope for, dream about, and struggle with as they break from Mexico, cross the border, and enter the United States. By listening to their voices today, we can better grasp the cost of immigration and the challenges their voices pose for us today.<sup>2</sup>

### ***La Familia: The Voice of the Poor***

Mexicans have a saying that goes, “*un texto fuera del contexto es un pretexto*” (a text out of its context is a pretext). In a similar way, if we look at immigrants’ lives outside of the economic, political, and social conditions that shape them, we will never be able to hear what they are saying. In order to understand any voice, we have to understand the context from which a person speaks. The story of *Alambrista* begins in a small remote village of Michoacán, Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Located in central Mexico, Michoacán is a state that is rich in natural resources but, like many places in Mexico, poor in economic development. One of its greatest exports today is its young people, who, like Roberto, come to the United States looking for a living wage.<sup>4</sup> In many parts of Mexico, people make their living by working the land for simple crops like corn, onions, mangos, and other fruits and vegetables. The work is hard, the machinery is often primitive, and the pay is minimal. Even today, many villages of Michoacán and other states in Mexico look like they do in the movie, far removed from the technologically sophisticated world of the United States. Like Roberto, many people in these towns live in simple houses. Often they do not have electricity, and few can afford the luxuries of appliances, if any, except for a natural-gas stove and perhaps at most a television. Only a few would have telephones, and computers would be as rare as a two-dollar bill. While Mexico is geographically close to the United States, it is economically in another hemisphere.

At the beginning of the movie, Roberto and his wife have a baby. The child is born in the home, not in a hospital, as it would be too far away, and his



parents lack both immediate transportation and funds to pay medical expenses or insurance. When we are first introduced to Roberto, we are present at the But not even economic poverty can rob Roberto and his wife of the priceless gift of a new child: the smile between a son and his mother and the tenderness of the father in the loving embrace with his child. The opening scene tells only part of the story. Behind the joy of a new family is the harsh reality of what many people have to endure: many families like Roberto's struggle simply to survive.

Ironically, the birth of Roberto's child actually breaks up the family. In virtually no time, impending economic responsibilities quickly eclipse the beauty of their life together. The joy of birth is overshadowed by another kind of labor pain: providing for a child in such an economically destitute place. In the movie, Roberto jokes about living only on potatoes, but many families like him are limited to a subsistence diet in Mexico. Raul Jimenez from Jalisco said he too faced a similar situation. He said, "My family got to the point where we could only afford sugar, eggs and tortillas, and when we could not afford even these, I had to immigrate."<sup>5</sup> Roberto represents the face of thousands of Mexican immigrants each day who painfully leave their families every day for work in the United States in order to provide for their families.

Mexican immigrants come to the United States primarily for economic reasons.<sup>6</sup> Over forty million Mexicans live in poverty and dream of making more than the national wages of 35 cents an hour or 200 pesos (about \$20) every two weeks.<sup>7</sup> Amid such scarcity, buying a Coke and a simple hamburger is a luxury. Mexico's 40-percent unemployment rate and low-paying jobs, when contrasted with the high demand for labor and comparatively high wages in the United States, draw Mexicans into the United States like a magnet.<sup>8</sup>

Mexican immigrants often come to the United States not because they want to get rich but, like Roberto, because they lack a steady job and a decent wage in Mexico.<sup>9</sup> Saul Gutierrez from Michoacán, shortly after being apprehended by immigration officials at the U.S.-Mexican border, said,

I left Mexico because many of us are desperate and poor. There are few jobs, and those that are available pay almost nothing. In my region of Michoacán, I only make about forty dollars a week, which is very little to live on for a family. If I pay the rent, I end up with little left over to buy food. After food

and rent, I have nothing left over for the kids. But if I buy something for them, how can I pay the rent? I feel so caught. I crossed the border last night because I want to provide for my family. As it is, we're barely making it.<sup>10</sup>

Many are forced to choose between poverty at home and the perils of immigration. Such decisions render the soul and divide families.

While the demands of poverty are difficult, the emotional pains are sometimes even greater. The family that the immigrant leaves behind often suffers one of the greatest costs, as it means that the fathers and sons leave for six to eight months out of the year or longer. Of all the trials the immigrant faces, leaving home is one of the most difficult. As Xavier Mendoza said,

When I came to the United States, I felt awful about leaving my family behind. I'm afraid at times, and I am constantly aware of the dangers. But it doesn't matter, and I try not to think about it because it is too painful. My family's need is even greater than my fears, and I just have to keep going; they need me if we are going to live a more dignified life.<sup>11</sup>

Another immigrant expressed similar sentiments. "The worst is leaving the family behind, and especially the kids... it is what hurts the most... but I do it so that we can have something in México."<sup>12</sup>

### ***La Esposa y La Madre:*** **The Voice of the Women Left Behind**

Some of the voices in the film that are hardest to hear are those of Roberto's mother and Roberto's wife. While Roberto treks up north in search of a job, they are left at home in Mexico. In the movie, we do not even know their names. Like many other women in similar situations, they are often known only in terms of their functional roles as wives and mothers, but we never hear what they have to say. They rarely speak, and, in relationship to the men of this world, their words have little to no effect. "I don't want you to go," said Roberto's wife, "but if you have to, whatever you think is right." They are left alone to cry in tears that no one will hear.

In many parts of Mexico today, women are often compelled to accept the decisions of their husbands without much recourse to their own points of view. They are some of the most powerless in the whole process, as they have the fewest choices. They often accept their difficulties and simply suffer in silence, burying their own needs and frustrations. Because they are often bound to the home as mothers, they have the least freedom of movement. After Roberto leaves in the movie, his wife will have even fewer options. When the husband immigrates, the mother becomes a dual provider. Like many wives of immigrants, she functions as both mother and father to the children, but she cannot work anywhere but in the house because the pressing needs of the family will absorb all her attention and energy. She loses the physical support of her husband, but she must now become parent, educator, and farm hand. Now she lives with loneliness and the fear of not being able to provide for her family while her husband looks for work up north.

Only rarely do families immigrate together. Most often, the man leaves home and his wife and children stay behind. Crossing together as a family is complex and dangerous. As Miguel Ortiz said,

When my wife and I tried to cross the border together, the immigration officials apprehended her and not me, and we were separate from each other. I spent weeks worrying about her. I did not even know where she was. Because she could not read, she could not even understand the numbers on a phone to dial me and tell me where she was. I felt so helpless and so did she.

Some who try to immigrate together end up regretting it, as seventeen-year-old Jesus Jimenez knows. After working in the fields of Fresno, California, he returned to Mexico to marry his girlfriend from his hometown in Mexico. After they married, he and his wife tried to cross the border by traversing the Otay mountains, near where Roberto crossed over the border in the movie. In the process, he and his wife hit a snowstorm, and the *coyote* who was guiding them abandoned them to die in the cold. Within a few hours, his wife of two weeks, Osveia Tepec Jimenez, age twenty, died in his arms amid the freezing temperatures of the mountains. While recuperating in the hospital, Jimenez said, "I've loved her all my life. We had so many plans. We were going to make a new life

here, so much better than the one we had. We had so many dreams, but we will never live them now. It's all my fault for bringing her."<sup>13</sup> Many immigrants like Jimenez have to choose between the guilt of leaving their families behind and the guilt of putting them through the dangerous trek and its consequences.

Many women whose husbands leave for months at a time speak about the impact of their husband's absence on their children.<sup>14</sup> Maria Orozco from Aguas Calientes, who is the mother of twelve children, said,

When my husband goes up north to work, he can be gone for anywhere from six months to a year and a half at a time. The kids miss him at first but eventually they simply began to resent him because he isn't there for them. On one level they know he has to leave to provide for us, but in the end they never feel he becomes a father to them because he is not there when they need him.<sup>15</sup>

Such is the case of many women in Mexico. They find some comfort in sharing their pain with other women who are going through similar ordeals, but they often feel powerless to change their situation. As a result, it is common for husbands and wives simply to shut down emotionally on both sides of the border. We see this in the movie when Roberto's mother pleads with him to stay and he ridicules her and walks away. When he leaves his wife, he does not even hug her. It is too painful to dwell too long on the choices. We are left with a picture of a mother holding a child while the husband rides away in a bus, a poignant, painful moment of the immigrant's perilous journey ahead and the women left behind.

### ***El Coyote: The Voice of the Hired Smuggler***

In the movie, little time is devoted to the actual experience of crossing the border. While Roberto has some challenges with the border patrol, he does not face any life-threatening dangers. Roberto simply finds his way to the border, crawls through a hole in the fence, and works his way northward. *Alambrista's* opening scenes do little to portray the disorientation many immigrants feel when they come to major cities like Tijuana (especially those immigrants who



come from rural areas) and the challenges they face as they try to navigate their way to the other side.

The politics of border control have changed much since the movie was first shot in the 1970s. Now, immigration is even more difficult than it was for Roberto. Major urban areas like San Diego, El Paso, Laredo, and others are virtually sealed off with physical barriers like walls, pushing immigrants into even more dangerous territory in remote mountains and snake-infested deserts. Increased border patrol agents, better technology, and bigger migration streams have also forced immigrants to move into more dangerous territory. Whereas previously an immigrant like Roberto could cross on his own, those who do so today inevitably need the assistance of hired guides or *coyotes*. Now it is more difficult than ever to cross over into the United States, making *coyotes* indispensable; immigrants cannot cross without them anymore.

*Coyotes* are often expensive and risky, and place in the immigration drama speaks of the demands and dangers of the journey ahead. Although many Mexican nationals barely make \$1,000 in a year, the cost of a *coyote* is currently almost \$2,000. Immigrants make up the financial difference with the help of relatives and friends who are already in the United States. The trek into the United States is also costly physically. "When I smuggle someone across," said one *coyote*, "I usually only bring along a can of beans, some tortillas, a can of tuna fish and two gallons of water. I have to ration it pretty carefully, as it can take us from three to four days to cross. But sometimes we get so tired and the food is so bad that we don't want to eat anything."<sup>16</sup>

Immigration now means enduring a long journey across a barren desert where temperatures reach up to 120 degrees in the summer. In contrast to Roberto's overnight crossing, it takes as long as three days today. "It's a difficult trek," commented another *coyote*, "because the wind blows sand in your face, and very often people's legs get swollen and blistered from the heat and the difficulty of walking for three or four days in a row, day and night."<sup>17</sup> Immigrants often have to wear high-heeled leather boots to protect them from snakebites in the desert, where rattlesnakes thrive and flourish. The *coyotes* and immigrants have only the clothes on their backs and the food they can carry, often without sufficient water to make it through the whole journey. The scenery, especially through California, can be breath-taking, but it

is not a camping trip for the immigrant. In the words of photojournalist John Annerino:

[Immigrants] will be wearing cheap rubber shower sandals and ill-fitting baseball cleats to protect their feet from rocks, thorns, hot sand, and lava, not form-fitting one hundred dollar hiking boots; they will carry their meager rations of tortillas, beans, sardines, and chilis in flimsy white plastic bags, not freeze-dried gourmet meals cooked over shiny white gas stoves carried in expensive gortex backpacks. And they will sleep on the scorched bare earth in thin cotton t-shirts, not in cozy two hundred dollar, down sleeping bags. They will follow vague routes, passed down from one desperate generation to the next, across a horizonless no-man's land, not well-manicured trails. Their signposts will be sun-bleached bones, empty plastic water jugs, a distant mountain, not hand-painted fluorescent signs with arrows pointing the trail every quarter mile. They will cross a merciless desert for jobs, not for scenic vistas. And they will try crossing it during the deadly summer months when harvest work is most plentiful, not during the clear, brisk days of a glorious Sonoran Desert winter when bird watchers delight in counting colorful migrating birds that flirt from one cactus blossom to another. And nothing will stop these honest people in their quest for a better life, not the killing desert, and not the transformation of the "tortilla curtain" into the Iron Curtain.<sup>18</sup>

Women are particularly vulnerable, as *coyotes* sometimes demand sex as payment or they take it by force. Pablo Sanchez noted one experience with immigrants soon after they crossed over:

A few weeks ago when I was down by the Salton Sea [in Southern California], I saw this group of people sitting by the side of the road. They looked lost, so I went up to them and asked if they needed any help. They told me they had just crossed the border, and the *coyote* grabbed one of the young women in the group, took her behind one of the mountains and raped her. They said the girl was screaming and yelling, but there was little we could do; it was like the *coyote* had taken all of us hostage, and we were fighting to get out alive.<sup>19</sup>

Immigrants need the *coyotes* but fear them; they trust them with their lives but they are sometimes robbed, exploited, and raped by them; they look to *coyotes* to help them but the *coyotes* often take advantage of their vulnerability; they cry out for help but often no one hears them.

### ***La Migra: The Voice of the Border Patrol***

In various scenes throughout the movie, Roberto comes face to face with the border patrol. Sometimes they keep Roberto from coming across while at other times they deport him after he has come into the United States. The immigrant is constantly on the alert for government agents who guard against their entry into the United States. Immigrants refer to them as *la migra*, a major branch of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The role and function of the INS also has changed much since the 1970s and continues to undergo major restructuring since the September 11th terrorist attacks, but generally speaking, for the immigrant, the border patrol symbolizes all that stands in the way of the immigrants' search for a better life.

Like Roberto, the immigrant faces the constant threat of *la migra*. The immigrant always must face the threat of deportation, and like Roberto, cannot evade this risk even in the workplace, in the restaurant, or the nightclub. Such deportations ruptured the little relational gains Roberto made on the other side of the border, and, when he was deported, he had to go through the painful process of making a living and making new relationships all over again. Immigration and deportation become a way of life for many immigrants as they find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of hope, loneliness, and desperation.

For many immigrants, however, the INS has a Jekyll-and-Hyde persona. On the one hand, its agents represent the cruel face of the American government that is hardened to their economic plight. Yet on the other hand, immigration officials have many dedicated men and women who actually save the lives of the immigrants. Many agents rescue immigrants who are stranded and in distress amid the difficult, daunting, and dangerous terrain of the Southwest. Shortly after the border patrol apprehended him, Mario Velasquez said,

Last night was incredibly difficult. We were walking all through the night in

the cold of the desert. And after awhile, everything in my body was in pain, my legs, my whole system was exhausted, because we didn't sleep either. We had to sleep in the mountains, but it was freezing there. And then we ran out of water. We were lost in the desert, and it was dangerous. And so eventually we had to turn ourselves into immigration officials just to survive, or we would have dehydrated out there.<sup>20</sup>

While there are documented cases of abuse of immigrants by border patrol agents, many immigrants speak about how the border patrol has rescued them in the midst of life-threatening conditions, even in snowstorms.<sup>21</sup> When faced with freak snowstorms in the mountains just north of San Diego, border patrol agent Johnny Williams said, "It's not an issue of how many apprehensions you make, it's how you rescue stranded immigrants. It pulls at the heartstrings of every agent out there to see a young lady or anyone jeopardized by these conditions. When you find someone that didn't make it, it's an experience you never forget."<sup>22</sup> Some immigration officials admit to feeling caught between the rock of government policy and the hard place of human suffering.

Others are more critical of the border safety initiatives, for they argue that they are token initiatives that mask a fundamentally unjust border strategy that violates human rights. As lawyer Claudia Smith says, "There is no way you can protect immigrants when you have a political policy that pushes them into vast expanses of hell."<sup>23</sup> With temperatures soaring into the 120-degree range in the summer, Smith believes that the current government policies do not protect but they endanger the lives of the immigrant.<sup>24</sup> They endanger them because the U.S. "prevention through deterrence" policy has not diminished immigration but simply pushed immigrants like Roberto into more dangerous and life-threatening routes.

## ***Los Muertos: The Voice of the Dead***

Many people each year lose their lives in the process of crossing the border. Yet we rarely hear anything about these deaths. They die swimming the canals, dehydrating in the deserts, or suffering through snakebites or even neo-nazi and vigilante groups. Many die in the deserts, without anyone even knowing

they are there. "When I brought people across last week," said Jesus Garcia, "I passed someone who died on the way. Birds were picking at its flesh, and animals had eaten away at its arms and legs."<sup>25</sup> If they are discovered at all, they are often unidentifiable, leaving the families in the dark about their whereabouts. Such bodies are often buried in cemeteries like the one in Holtville, California, where they are put in the back of a burial ground, next to a garbage dump, without a marker, with just a brick that says, "John Doe," or "Jane Doe." It is sobering to think that after all they have gone through, this is how many come to the end of their lives—and at such young ages. Many of these young immigrants who die are in their teens and twenties.

Some newspapers have begun to chronicle these immigrant deaths, which in some regions have risen over 1000 percent in the last couple of years: "At least seven Mexican Immigrants died and more than 50 others were rescued in rural San Diego County canyons Friday after a freak spring storm dropped a foot of snow on mountains that are a favorite route of illegal border crossers;"<sup>26</sup> "Six illegal immigrants sleeping on railroad tracks in south Texas, possibly to avoid snakebites, were killed when a Union Pacific freight train ran over them;"<sup>27</sup> "A stolen pickup truck filled with suspected illegal immigrants careened off a winding mountain road in rural Riverside County on Saturday as it attempted to evade border patrol agents, killing seven men and injuring 18 others...;"<sup>28</sup> "Six suspected illegal immigrants trying to escape border patrol agents plunged 120 feet into a ravine near San Diego on Saturday night, leaving one dead;"<sup>29</sup> "Abandoned by smugglers in driving snow, overcome by freezing temperatures or hit by cars as they crossed isolated roadways, eight illegal immigrants have died... as they tried to make their way across the treacherous terrain..."<sup>30</sup> The dynamics of Mexican immigration are full of stories like these. The most common cause of death is the canals, and others die from dehydration from desert heat, hypothermia from the cold temperatures in the mountains, or suffocating in confined spaces like box cars on trains or trucks. Some die from train or vehicle accidents. Others die from snakebites in the desert.

When people get bitten by a snake, and they are tens of miles from any help, in the middle of a desert-nowhere, their bodies often swell up and they are sometimes left behind to die by the group they are traveling with.

I'll never forget the time a mother came to me in Mexico and said, please, take my son with you when you go across the border. He is fifteen now and talented, and he has no future here in Mexico. At least he would have a chance up there. So I took him with me. And in the middle of the night, while we were sleeping on the ground, a rattlesnake came up and bit him. He started going into convulsions and there was nothing we could do. By morning he was dead. I felt so bad. And I just didn't have the heart to tell his mother. So I even wrote her for years in his name, so she would think he was still alive. Not a day goes by when I don't think about it. And, you know, sometimes I ask, why did this have to happen? And all I keep coming up with is that we were hungry.<sup>31</sup>

Some find passage through stowing away on trains or aboard any vehicle that can help them get across to the other side:

I've come across the border in a number of ways. Sometimes I've hid myself in a box-car full of flour. Other times I've stowed away on the inside tire-wall of a truck. And other times I've buried myself in a truckload of carrots. I find if I position myself in the right way, the carrots give me the most breathing space, because in between the carrots, I can still breathe pretty well.<sup>32</sup>

Others, like Joe in the movie, are not so lucky and are wounded or die from falling off or jumping from trains. Diego Aceves was barely nineteen when he was forced to immigrate because his mother had abandoned him; he had to make a living shining shoes and selling candies on the street. Seeking a better life, he came to the United States, crossed the border, and stowed away on a train. While the train was still moving, one of his companions shouted that immigration was near, and each jumped off the train. Never having jumped trains before, he got as close as he could to the tracks before jumping, but the undercarriage of the train caught his legs and the wheels of the train cut off his legs from just below the hip.

Yet even amid such tragedies, many immigrants do not have the luxury to mourn. When Joe died in the movie, Roberto did not have time to deal with



his loneliness or his pain at the loss of his only companion in the United States. He needed to survive, and, as is brought out at the end of the movie in the junkyard, many are pressed to the breaking point. The immigrants have an economic gun at their backs, but as they face the prospect of immigration across the border, they often look down the nozzle of a tank. Since 1996, the border has become more and more militarized. As a result, more than 2,300 people have died making the dangerous trek from Mexico to the United States; more than a planeload of people die each year.<sup>33</sup> Because many deaths go unreported and undiscovered, the number of those who die trying to cross the border is presumably even more.<sup>34</sup> Until the United States dedicates resources to addressing the human costs of migration comparable to what it dedicates to the economic costs, many immigrants will continue to die in the process of crossing the Mexican-U.S. border. It is scandalous to think that an immigrant like Roberto dies each day since new and more restrictive border controls were implemented in 1994.

### **Joe: The Voice of American Culture**

Those who are fortunate enough to make it across the border face further challenges, especially as they try to find work and integrate into society and the American culture. Joe is a complex character in *Alambrista* who functions as a composite character. Joe shepherds Roberto through the first stages of the socialization process into American life. He represents the many facets of the process of entering a new culture. On the one hand, he welcomes him. On the other hand, he teaches him how to leave his past behind. He teaches him the mannerisms of how to walk in the world as a “gringo,” how to order food in a restaurant, and how to speak like an “American.” One of the greatest costs of the process of immigration is not just Roberto’s leaving his family behind but leaving his culture and history behind. Not afforded the benefit of a language school, he learns the English he needs to survive. The physical, psychological, emotional, and physical challenges are enormous. Gustavo Magala said, “Sometimes it can take you thirty days or longer to recover from the trauma of immigrating, but you don’t really have any time to rest because you have to start work right away.”

Not surprisingly, as Roberto goes through similar trials in the movie, he spends a large part of the first days in a complete daze, wandering around in a hungry stupor, drunk with the promise of a better life yet burdened by the painful realities of being an alien in a foreign land. He leaves Mexico because he cares for his family, but he arrives in the United States where people only care about the work he can do. He speaks words but is not understood. He hears them but does not understand. Like many immigrants, he does not even understand himself and how to put into words what he is experiencing. As Roberto struggles to find his way in the United States, we see the immigrant's experience of alienation, and alienation means feeling disconnected from major political, social, and even religious institutions. It also means being a stranger to others and even oneself.

### ***El Contratista: The Voice of Corporate America***

Another unnamed voice in the movie is the "person" behind the multinational corporation and the *contratistas* or supervisors who help make the capital machine function. Some of these hired overseers and their bosses often view immigrants as just arms and limbs without heart or soul, unrecognized bodies viewed in terms of their profit potential rather than their human potential. We can see the dynamics of corporate exploitation of the poor when Roberto acquires is in one of the fields. When the immigration patrols came on the scene, it was not because they were making daily rounds through the area. They came because the *contratistas* called them. After having exploited them for their labor, they had them deported so they would not have to pay them their wages. It is not uncommon for growers to use immigrants for their labor and then call immigration. Ironically, Roberto's own Mexican/Mexican American "brothers" are the ones that take advantage of him. This kind of exploitation still happens today. The immigrant is oppressed because he cannot speak, and if he speaks, others will take his place. "What about my pay?" protests Roberto. His pleas for justice fall on deaf ears as the *contratistas* drive away.

Throughout the movie, there are various scenes dealing with difficulties of labor, fieldwork, and exploitation of the vulnerable. Even today, California continues to be one of the major producers of fruit and vegetables in the country,

and most of the work of tending and harvesting the crops is done by immigrant workers. One third of all agriculture in the United States comes from California. Eighty-five percent of all agricultural workers in California are Mexican workers, and 66 percent of these workers are undocumented. Imagine what would happen to the U.S. economy if suddenly people like Roberto did not show up for work?

Agriculture depends on Mexican labor, as we see in the end of the movie when Roberto tries to come back to the United States and he gets recruited by the *contratistas* and other corporate agents who benefit from their labor but often deny them living wages and human dignity.

As an illegal alien, he has no rights, and his cries for justice fall on deaf ears. For those who exploit, Roberto is a good business deal: He's cheap labor, and, if he complains, he can be manipulated through the threat of deportation. As in the initial work scene where he hides himself inside a water-trough pipe, he literally is hanging on for his life. "Things haven't really changed that much for our people," said José Ramirez, "We're really in a new epoch of the *hacienda*. While technically we are not enslaved, we still find ourselves oppressed by the multi-national corporations who abuse us because of our economic need."<sup>35</sup> Like in the movie, when workers strike, they are either dismissed or others are brought in to take their place. "For every field worker in this valley," said one man from the Coachella Valley in California, "there are ten who can take their place. The corporations have the upper hand, but when we have a problem, what can we do?"<sup>36</sup>

The low price of labor and difficulty of work makes fieldwork attractive to no one except the most desperate. Immigrants like Roberto do stoop labor in the burning sun and work amid poisonous pesticides for long, backbreaking hours under the burning rays of the sun so that people might have good fruit and vegetables at low prices. Even despite their difficulties of entering the country, immigrants go through extreme measures to cross the border in order to find jobs that no one wants or is willing to do regardless of the pay. What seems like a promotion for Roberto is a recipe for cancer. Exposed to chemicals that cause cancer, birth defects, and early death, many die early deaths. "Sometimes I come home at night," said Mario Rodriguez, who works in the fields, "and I have these painful coughing spells. I get these tremendous headaches from breathing in these

chemicals all day. I mentioned it to my boss, but she doesn't do anything about it."<sup>37</sup> While there have been some changes in legislation since César Chávez fought for more just conditions for migrant workers, growers still find ways around these laws, and immigrants are still the ones who pay the greatest cost. Nonetheless, the immigrant's fingerprint is part of every vegetable that is eaten and every piece of fruit that is consumed each day.

## Conclusion

The movie *Alambrista* is a prototype of the immigration drama that happens every day. Fathers leave their children, women are left behind, immigrants come looking for work, *coyotes* take advantage of their need and vulnerability, the border patrol chases them into the desert and mountains, many die along the way, and those who do make it are forced to work in low-paying, exploitative, high-risk jobs that no one wants except the desperate. The story of Roberto is not a new story. While many of the particular aspects of immigration have changed since the movie was made in the 1970s, many of the essential dimensions remain the same or have become even worse. Immigrants still break from home seeking a better life, and jobs on the horizon lure them to promises of a more dignified future. They are often aware of the costs of leaving home but staying home leaves them no options either. This is the story of Mexican immigrants today, but their voices are not unique. They echo the voices of almost every family in the United States, whose ancestors immigrated to the United States at one point or another and faced pains, insults, vulnerabilities and difficulties, and even death for the sake of a better life. Beneath the voices of the immigration drama, we hear the voice of the poor seeking to become full human beings. The tragedy of the immigrant, to paraphrase the words of the director Bob Young, is that while they often spend much of their time cultivating the soil, they are left with little to develop their human potential.



## Discussion Questions

1. Which voice in the immigration drama is new to you? Which one most challenges you?
2. What is your own immigration heritage? What are some of the stories of your ancestors' journeys to the United States? In what ways are they similar or different from that of Roberto and his family and other immigrants today?
3. If you faced an economic situation similar to Roberto's (or other immigrants today), would you be willing to take similar risks for the sake of your family? Why or why not?
4. Is illegal immigration to the United States justified, even if one does not have proper documentation? Why or why not?
5. One of the chief causes of immigration is economic need. Is it justifiable for companies to pay immigrants below the minimum wage for the sake of better profits? Why or why not?
6. Do you agree with this statement: While much energy has gone into analyzing the economic costs of migration, little has gone into analyzing the human costs of migration. What do you see as the human costs of migration?
7. Discuss the following statement: "It is not possible to eat breakfast in the morning, or any meal of the day without eating food that has been brought there by immigrant labor." In what ways does your lifestyle depend on immigrant labor?

## Notes

1. The voices in this article are based on actual conversations with immigrants but the names have been changed.
2. For more on voices of the immigrant, particularly as related to their spiritual lives, see Daniel Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2002).
3. Mexicans who immigrate to the United States generally come from Mexican states where there is high unemployment, particularly Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Durango, Zacatecas, and San Luis Potosí.
4. For more on Mexican migration streams and social and economic dimensions of the topic, see Jorge A. Bustamante, *Cruzar la línea: la migración de México a los Estados Unidos*, 1. ed. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997).
5. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 12 January 2000, tape recording, El Centro Detention Center, El Centro, California.
6. Even a cursory look at the global economy illustrates why migrants come to the United States. According to the United Nations, if the population of the world were proportioned out to one hundred people, 59 percent of the world's resources would be in the hands of six people, and *all six of these* would live in the United States. Of these one hundred, only one would have a computer and only one would have a college education.  
 Other immigrants like Central Americans also have come to the United States because of political instability in their country. For more on this subject, see Leo R. Chavez, Estévan T. Flores, and Marta López Garza, "Migrants and Settlers: A Comparison of Undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States," *Frontera Norte* 1, no. 1 (1989): 49–75.
7. For a descriptive account of the beauty and poverty of Mexico, see John Annerino, *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999).
8. Mexicans, on the whole, earn about one-fifth to one-fourth of the wages earned by inhabitants of the United States. See John H. Coatsworth, "Commentary on Enrique Dussel Peters' 'Recent Structural Changes in Mexico's Economy: A Preliminary Analysis of Some Sources,'" in *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1998), 75–78.



9. CONAPO (Consejo Nacional de Población), COLEF (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte), and STPS (Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social), *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte* (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1994).
10. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 12 January 2000, tape recording, El Centro Detention Center, El Centro, California.
11. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 19 January 2000, tape recording, El Centro Detention Center, El Centro, California.
12. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 12 January 2000, tape recording, El Centro Detention Center, El Centro, California.
13. Anne-Marie O'Connor, "Conditions Turn More Perilous For Border Crossers," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 January 1999.
14. While both men and women immigrate to Mexico, over 85 percent of Mexican immigrants apprehended by U.S. immigration officials are male. U.S. Immigration officers Henry Rolon and Manuel Figueroa, interview by author, 18 January 2000, tape recording, U.S. Immigration offices, El Centro, California, 19 January 2000.
15. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 12 January 2002, tape recording, Northern Indiana.
16. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 January 2000, tape recording, Coachella, California.
17. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 January 2000, tape recording, Coachella, California.
18. John Annerino, *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999), 40–42.
19. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 January 2000, tape recording, Coachella, California.
20. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 19 January 2000, tape recording, El Centro Detention Center, El Centro, California.
21. Associated Press, "Border Patrol Agent Who Sank Raft Carrying People to Resign," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 December 1999, Sec. A, p. 14.
22. O'Connor, "Conditions Turn More Perilous For Border Crossers."

23. Interview by author, 21 April 2002, tape recording, Casa de Migrante, Tijuana, Mexico.
24. For a descriptive account of desert rescues of immigrants by the border patrol, see Annerino, *Dead in Their Tracks*, 82–101, 173–75.
25. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 January 2000, tape recording, Coachella, California.
26. Ken Ellingwood, H. G. Reza, and James Rainey, “At Least 7 Migrants Perish in Cold,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 1999, Sec. A, p. 1.
27. Times Wire Reports, “Asleep on Tracks, 6 Immigrants Die,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 October 1998, Sec. A, p. 10.
28. Tony Perry, Josh Meyer, and Henry Weinstein, “7 Die as Truck Evading Border Agents Crashes,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 April 1996, Sec. A, p. 1.
29. Greg Miller, “6 Fleeing Border Patrol Fall Into Ravine; 1 Killed,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1996, Sec. A, p. 3.
30. O’Connor, “Conditions Turn More Perilous For Border Crossers,” Sec. A, p. 1.
31. Mexican immigrant, date unknown, San Antonio, Texas.
32. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 23 January 2000, tape recording, Los Angeles, California.
33. Eschbach, “Death at the Border,” 430–54.
34. While more than 1,600 people died between 1993 and 1997, these figures are arguably very conservative. These are the documented deaths, and the actual figures are much higher, given the fact that these estimates do not include those who die in the deserts and are buried in the sands, those who drown in the canals or rivers and float into the Gulf of Mexico, and those who die on the Mexican side of the border. See Eschbach, “Death at the Border,” 430–54.
35. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 23 January 2000, tape recording, Los Angeles, California.
36. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 23 January 2000, tape recording, Los Angeles, California.
37. Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 January 2000, tape recording, Coachella, California.