

W I T N E S S

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## Brown Hordes and Green Fears

Debra Salazar

*"Yo soy de la tierra pero me llaman extraterrestrial."*

—sign carried at First National Latino March on  
Washington, October, 1996

*"It's dishonest to think that we can do anything about population  
without also looking at immigration."*

—environmental activist, August, 1998

I have spent much of the last five years hanging out in coffee shops with environmentalists. Sure there was the Okanagan lake shore, a heather garden along the Inside Passage, the magazine mailings in Eugene and Tofino — but mostly coffee shops and kitchen tables. To be honest, I was not just hanging out. I was interviewing, sometimes in a structured way, other times the stories wandered across decades and topics. Somewhere in British Columbia I got addicted to coffee. Working my way south from the fiftieth parallel, never straying too far from the Pacific Coast, my intent was to analyze the politics of the environmental movement. Picking up a vice was all right too. My computer and I did make maps of ideology; we did the science part of political science. But mostly I listened and puzzled.

Taking advantage of friends who lived in Portland, I spent a summer interviewing around the city. Every morning I would roll my bike down the driveway; I loved riding to interviews. Pedaling around town in my shorts seemed less like work and got me brownie points with the environmentalists. But the most important reason was that I love being outside in the summer. My California genes have adapted well to the Pacific Northwest climate but I savor every summer day, soaking up as much sun as I can while it is here.

In the course of pedaling around Portland I heard about a new organization. Alternatives to Growth Oregon (AGO) was trying to stop, maybe even reverse, population growth. AGO supported state policies that would discourage, or at least not subsidize, growth. Population control is a difficult issue for many environmental organizations, but AGO took on the even more contentious problem of immigration. AGO leaders argued that no state could contain population growth without a national

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population policy that severely limited immigration into the United States.

The U.S. environmental movement is not of one mind on the issue of immigration. In 1998 when the Sierra Club presented its members with a referendum on the subject, charges of racism, leftism, xenophobia, and elitism were hurled back and forth. In the aftermath of the Sierra Club battle, many Oregon environmentalists were critical of AGO, seeing the organization's immigration analysis as misdirected and racist. But AGO forged on, explicitly deploring racism and attempting to link its population agenda to social justice.

I was intrigued; one of the first environmentalist books I read as a teenager was Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*. Like thousands of other people who read that book, I was horrified by the image of hordes of (brown) people overwhelming the earth and one another. After reading Ehrlich's predictions of famine, I could feel self-righteous about my decision, reached at the age of eight or nine, never to have children. I was saving the earth.

But Ehrlich's bomb never exploded. And as the Chicano movement protested forced sterilization of poor Latinas and called white environmentalists racist for criticizing our "excessive" fertility, I was no longer so sure about the priority of stopping population growth (but that is the story of my life, a steady movement away from certainty). Since then I had developed an ambivalent relation to the idea of population and its control. Back to Portland.

This was a particularly gorgeous August day. I had an appointment with a woman who was an officer in AGO. She had not been enthusiastic about being interviewed but I had a persuasive research assistant. Her home was in the west hills of Portland so I headed across town and then up. It was a great ride, lots of traffic, a steep grade on a narrow road — the best of urban riding. When I got to her house, sweat was flowing off my midsummer brown skin. Of course I dried my hand on my shorts before introducing myself and shaking her hand. She led me down to her study.

Ms. Population told me about her childhood on the east coast, about how development had spoiled the special places (a story not unlike my own) and about her determination to stop that process before it ruined Oregon. We were cautious with one another. I wanted her to talk about immigration, but she had been bruised by this topic in the past. Finally we got there.

"I very much resent the fact that you cannot talk about immigration without being called a racist, because I think it's a numbers issue, it

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doesn't have anything to do with racism."

That would be frustrating; I hate it when raising a subject will label me a bigot. So I was prepared to be a sympathetic listener. And Ms. Population made a compelling case. She shook me with her account of the numbers.

Population growth is "*the* environmental issue." At the current rate of growth, by the year 2050 the U.S. will have 400 million people. "The numbers indicate that right now half of our growth is coming from immigration. We're growing by three million people a year. Just think about that—the whole state of Oregon. Every year we're growing by that amount of people." Ms. Population reiterated that it is purely a numbers issue; it does not matter what color the immigrants are, where they come from. This is not about race but about numbers. Having 400 million people in this country will mean more sprawl, less wildlife habitat, more social problems.

Just like when I first read *The Population Bomb*, I am appalled by these numbers and when I return home I search for confirmation. Sure enough, the Census Bureau documents current population growth at about 2.5 million people a year. At this rate, the U.S. population would grow from its current level of 275 million to 400 million by the year 2050. Because the Census estimates that two-thirds of the total growth comes from immigrants and their descendants, many environmentalists see a radical reduction in immigration as necessary to protect the U.S. environment.

In Oregon the situation is more scary. Oregon's population has doubled during the last 40 years, reaching nearly 3.5 million in the 2000 census. Between 1990 and 2000, Oregon grew at more than 1.5 times the national rate. Most of Oregon's new residents come from other states; international immigration accounts for 14% of total population growth in the state (about 7300 people/year). For Portlanders, like Ms. Population, these numbers mean fewer birds, more streams running in concrete tunnels, more houses where wetlands used to be, and longer waits in traffic.

All of this takes me back to how we lost California. As a child I played in creeks, orchards, and irrigation canals in the Santa Clara Valley. We would mount expeditions along the creek that ambled a few blocks from my grandmother's house. Three or four brown little girls marching under the trees, looking for clues, hiding from enemies. We were not allowed to go into the canals, but the promise of treasures and our delight in defiance overrode our parents' warnings. The concrete-lined canals were the sites of the best scavenger hunts, yielding old tires and car fenders. As

a teenager, I bicycled the edges of the valley, past strawberry fields up into the foothills, along roads that rolled and curved forever. My grandmothers and aunts worked in the fruit canneries during the summers while some of my cousins would retrace their parents' steps to the orchards, picking prunes to earn money for school clothes in the fall.

But even as I became eligible to vote, the strawberry fields were transformed into condominiums; the orchards became wealthy subdivisions. A little over a decade later the Santa Clara Valley became Silicon Valley. A new generation of immigrant women works in chip factories instead of strawberry fields or peach canneries. Instead of breathing fungicides all day while bending over to pick strawberries for pennies a basket, they wear latex gloves to weave circuits in sterile rooms, ingesting new and unknown poisons for dollars an hour.

But it was not brown people who brought about this transformation, who built the new houses that stretched to the ends of the valley and then up the once sacred hills. It was white people from "back east." Our population bomb exploded with white people from the eastern states. They came to California by the hundreds of thousands a year, looking for the promised land. In 1960, when I learned to ride a bicycle, 640,000 Mexicans and Italians fought one another for space in the churches, bars, and parks of the Santa Clara Valley. Today almost 1,700,000 people find no space on the highways, in the amusement parks, or in the shopping malls.

So I understand Ms. Population. I had to leave California, too many people for me, no place for a girl to be alone. I do not want that to happen to the Puget Sound, where I live now, and of course she does not want it to happen to the Willamette Valley. We move on.

What about the argument that population is a global problem? Why not focus on the social conditions that underlie global population growth? Maybe if there were better living conditions in developing countries, there would be fewer people who want to emigrate to the United States.

Ms. Population responds forcefully. She has heard these arguments before: "I think it's ridiculous that we should say we need to deal with this as a global issue." First it is impractical and imperialistic. We cannot control what other countries do. We do need to reorient our foreign policy to stop subsidizing dictators and to support poorer countries making an effort to improve conditions for people, especially women, and we should assist them by subsidizing birth control. But we cannot tell them what to do; that would be racist. And, we cannot wait for them. "We need to do a hell of a lot more all over the world because we are causing the growth to happen. I don't think that should deny us the right to say we want to

protect this place because this is our home.”

She anticipates the guilty liberal response before I can offer it. Yes the United States consumes a disproportionate share of the world's resources and creates more than its share of waste. We must stop that, change our consumption patterns. But we must also protect the species and habitats within our borders, now.

“There's this assumption that we shouldn't have any right to care about saving our particular country. A lot of people think Americans have no right to say, 'Shut the door because we care about our environment. We're living at too high a standard of living when the rest of the world isn't.' Well . . . I'd like everybody to live at a lower standard of living, and feel we have a right to say to the rest of the world, 'We can't deal with all the world's problems.'”

Of course, *think globally, act locally*. Our first priority, indeed where we will have the most influence, is in protecting our own homes, our own places. But whose place is this? Lately I have been reading about salmon. I have looked at maps of the people who harvested salmon before white people managed to decimate the runs. The Tillamook, Coos, and Siuslaw peoples lived on the Oregon coast and seemed to have managed quite nicely. And there were the Ohlone people in the Fremont area of California near where my mother lives. Their case is straightforward. This was their place; white people took it, and killed and converted them. But American Indians are not the issue in the immigration debate. It is mestizos crossing the U.S./Mexico border who comprise the largest stream of immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized. It is mestizos walking north, who die in the Sonoran Desert. No we cannot have an honest conversation about population without discussing immigration. But neither can we talk about immigration without also talking about immigrants.

My grandmother, born near Loreto, Baja California, in the early 1900s, first crossed the border into the U.S. in 1924. Candelaria Arias was an illegal alien. Unmarried and caring for a small daughter, she had lived in migrant camps in Baja California, cooking and washing for Mexican farmworkers. Then, looking for something better, she took her daughter north. That daughter, now nearing eighty, recalls cross-border travel between Mexicali (Baja California) and Calexico (California) during the 1920s. “Nobody had papers then; it was easy to go back and forth. It started getting hard around 1932.”

My grandmother was deported in late 1932. By then married and the mother of three U.S. citizens, she went back across the border and waited to get her papers. The one photograph marking my mother's infancy

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was taken as she became a temporary refugee from the state of her birth. In that photo, Candelaria holds Lupe, her fourth child, posing for the immigration authorities, preparing for an authorized journey from Calexico to Mexicali. My grandmother's travels during that period were not unique.

The United States has always danced a North American tango with Mexican workers, big, abrupt moves tracking economic rhythms. From the 1880s to the 1930s, Mexicans were recruited to work on the railroads and in the fields. Having dispensed with Chinese workers, Mexican labor was essential as the U.S. hurriedly expanded its transportation and irrigation infrastructure. Federally subsidized water created California agri-business with its penchant for growing melons in the desert. Someone had to spend 100° days bending over to pick those melons.

But then came the Depression and the Dust Bowl; Oklahoma farmers migrated west and competed with Mexicans for work in the California fields. Poor as Steinbeck's Okies were, they were real Americans. The few jobs and relief benefits available were not to be wasted on Mexicans. During the 1930s up to a million Mexicans, including many U.S. citizens, were deported. My grandmother, my mother, my aunts and uncle were lucky; properly documented, they returned to (Alta) California in late 1933. They spent the 1930s migrating from Lindsay to San Jose and back every year, following the harvest, working the fields.

World War II brought prosperity and, again, the U.S. signed the dance cards of Mexican laborers. This time the arrangements were more formal. In 1942 the U.S. and Mexico created the Bracero Program. From its inception through the end of the Korean War, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were contracted to do seasonal work in the U.S. Many stayed, without benefit of papers. Many others did not bother to sign a Bracero contract. They came without authorization and farmers were happy to have them; the Bracero regulations governing transportation, wages, and working conditions were cumbersome and costly. No one paid much attention until the recession following the Korean War. Then the Eisenhower Administration responded to the "wetback crisis" by searching out illegal aliens who had penetrated the border. Trucks were used to round up Mexicans in their neighborhoods and at their workplaces. They were then transported to detention centers and processed. Accounts of the period suggest that federal agents were neither polite nor in conformity with Constitutional due process requirements in their dealings with suspect Mexicans. As one environmental group, Negative Population Growth, describes the period:



However insensitively named, Operation Wetback in 1953 and 1954 was the United States' last, and only truly successful, effort to root out illegal immigration. Using extensive sweeps across the southwest, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) achieved the Eisenhower administration's goals. Some 2.1 million, mostly Mexican, illegal aliens were removed between 1953 and 1955. While abuses marred the effort, illegal immigration stayed under control for more than a decade.

By that time, my grandparents had settled in the Santa Clara Valley, hundreds of miles from the U.S./Mexico border. My family included two generations of U.S. citizens, too many to send back to Mexicali. But others were more vulnerable. In 1953, a family friend, Richard Pérez, returned from three years in a North Korean prisoner-of-war camp to find his father under siege from immigration authorities. Ysidro Pérez lacked papers to legitimize his presence in the United States; he was an illegal alien. He had come as a contract worker decades before and had overstayed his visa, violating the contract.

I know little of this history at the time of my interview with Ms. Population. Afterward I spend hours interviewing my parents, aunts and uncles, trying to patch together our family's immigration story. Simultaneously, I spend late summer afternoons in the library to fill gaps in my education, belatedly learning the history of the U.S./Mexico border. But still I am without a response—to the immigration question.

I am accustomed to being without answers. I also understand the luxury of indulging uncertainty. While college professors ponder, wetlands disappear and farmlands are paved.

Ms. Population knows that we have to act in this time and place. "For anybody who is here right now, I'm saying that it doesn't matter if you arrived yesterday or whatever." She does not propose to send anyone back, only to close the door, firmly. I understand this decision rule—for one thing it is decisive. But I cannot get past wondering what distinguishes the application of this rule now from its assertion in the past.

In the 1920s, Candelaria Arias López was welcome to work at U.S. factories and farms. In the 1930s, the U.S. government closed the border to her sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews; their sweat was not needed. In the 1940s, there was work for everyone again. In the 1950s, Richard Pérez had to fight the U.S. government to keep his father from being returned to Mexico. By the late 1950s, the U.S. had changed steps, leading more Mexican workers north rather than chasing illegals south.

Then, in the 1990s, immigrant Mexicans once again became a problem. For some environmentalists this is a problem of numbers, of overpopulation. For them, Antonio López, who plants trees in the Oregon Cascades, adds to our numbers; he should not have been allowed to cross and his family should not be allowed to join him. How is he different from Candelaria Arias? Why close the border now? Again? Unable to shake these questions, I take sweaty refuge in history. The library absorbs more of my summer.

People have migrated through the border region for thousands of years. But I keep forgetting; the history of indigenous people is not part of the conversation about immigration. More relevant to this discussion is the relatively recent creation of the current U.S./Mexico border. Prior to the Mexican War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, most of what is now the U.S. Southwest was part of Mexico. Ulysses S. Grant referred to the U.S./Mexican War as "one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation." Widely condemned as an opportunistic invasion of a sovereign nation, the war was justified by Manifest Destiny and its attribution of inferiority to southern Europeans, indigenous Americans, and the mestizo people who shared both heritages. Secretary of the Treasury Robert J. Walker asserted the U.S. role was to prevent the western part of the continent from falling "into the hands of the semi-barbarous hordes of Mexico," comprising "every poisonous compound of blood and color." By severing the Mexican nation from much of its most valuable territory and drawing an artificial line separating families and communities, the U.S. constructed a border that would be costly to defend. Even higher, wider walls and microchip-embedded detection technology do not stop the migrants. The architecture of this border is not pretty. We proceed.

Ms. Population reminds me that the environment, not immigration, is her primary concern. Immigration is only one part of the problem, a misunderstood part. This misunderstanding, and the obfuscation and name-calling associated with it, frustrate and infuriate her; but it is protecting the environment that drives her.

"There's no point in living, as far as I'm concerned . . . you know the kind of world we're leaving the next generation is pretty bleak. People get less involved with nature; there's less opportunity to feel a contact with nature. The pace of our lifestyle, computers, everything about it is geared toward taking [away] that connection between people and the land and the plants and animals . . ."

I feel like this sometimes. It leads to my SUV-in-every-garage, computer-

chip-in-every-pocket rant. This is only a build-up to: "Instead of burying our hands and shovels in the soil, we connect to the earth through Vibram-soled shoes with computer-generated lasts. We thank techno-gods every day for circuit boards and Kevlar." But even as I stretch out into this part of the rant, my awareness that I own four bicycles, two computers, and two automobiles humbles, even mocks me. That awareness does not stop the sadness though. I know what Ms. Population means. I learned about connection with land in my grandmother's garden.

I used to follow Candelaria Arias López through the garden on summer mornings. I adored her enough to want to help, though I was so young I cannot imagine I was helpful. But I remember — we pulled weeds, clipped dead leaves, picked off insects, spread coffee grounds, and watered each plant. We moved slowly; she took time to talk to the flowers, encouraging them, sympathizing with those that had wilted in the heat. And she sang. I learned only a few of the flowers, there were so many. But I experienced a rich calm and a sense of awe at what a hard-working woman and the soil could create. And I was not the only one.

Many of my aunts and cousins grow flowers. My cousins Sharon and Patricia sustain their small patches of beauty in the heart of Silicon Valley. They planted special flowers, lavender and pink and white, along the sidewalk after one of our aunts died this spring. Sharon joins her neighbors to fight the invading monuments to the computer chip, attending innumerable public meetings to be ignored by numerous public officials, trying to preserve a small space for people, and their gardens. Then there is my cousin Jennifer, a resident of the Willamette Valley for twenty-five years (is this her place?). Combining her father's restlessness with our grandmother's aesthetic, she spends summers in her garden, moving flowers, searching for the perfect place.

My cousins are not environmentalists. They do not write checks to Greenpeace and they spend too many hours in automobiles. But there is a part of them that knows the soil as a source of beauty and finds solace in their gardens. They know about connection with nature.

Our grandmother planted pine as well as apricot trees. She offered empathetic words to birds and mother possums as well as plants. She became a child again at the sight of a deer or a seal, recounting stories of her early years on the ranch, before death, separation, and migration. My cousins and I still have her stories, her songs, her "worker's hands." We still have roots in her California soil.

Ms. Population asks, "Are people the only thing that counts?" My cousins would answer no. They, and I, the descendants of "semi-barbarous

hordès” and the granddaughters of Candelaria Arias López, share much with Ms. Population.

“To me, we have an obligation to preserve other species, and we’re not doing it. We’re not even thinking about it. The people who are saying that we need to have population control at all costs, and I read analyses all the time that say, ‘Can we feed all the people that are coming?’ I don’t really care! What is happening to all the rest of the species on this earth? I care about that. And to me it’s almost a religious thing – that is my religion. I think we have an obligation to preserve species on this planet. Not an obligation to provide food to as many people as can be bred!”

I would not say it like this, most days. But I can get in that space; I can feel overwhelmed and angry at the destruction humans perpetrate. Every January as I pedal south from my home, I see more houses marching up the hillsides above the Skagit Valley, more superstores where flooded fields hosted swans. There is still room for coyote and eagles to wander the Skagit lowlands, but it has been years since I have seen a fox.

Nine years ago at Candelaria Arias López’ grave site, a fox strolled along the hillside above us. One of my uncles whispered that on an early trip to the valley, the family had lived on that hillside. At subsequent funerals, several of my aunts tell of the same residence. Along one drive from the cemetery to a cousin’s house, my aunt Eva, the oldest, points out the places they camped, picked strawberries or prunes. This family history is now paved in economic development and population growth. I wonder if foxes still live in the cemetery.

Ms. Population’s outrage morphs back to political strategy and environmental analysis. She returns to numbers.

“I don’t think people have any factual information on population numbers. I think if you asked the average American at what rate the nation is growing and where it is coming from, I don’t think they’d have a clue. I don’t think they realize what it means fifty years down the line. I don’t think they’ve envisioned the United States with four hundred million people. I don’t think they’re taking your experience and my experience from when we were kids and realizing what it was like then, what it’s like now. I don’t think they’re thinking about what that means for what this place is going to look like, and what is going to be here with us.

“We’re having catastrophes in all kinds of migratory birds and whales, and so many species, we’re just eliminating the possibility of them surviving on the planet because of our practices and our numbers. And it certainly is . . . consumption; but it’s not just that . . . it’s the sheer numbers.”

My cousin Jennifer returns from a weekend in Tijuana celebrating a

*Debra Salazar*

baptism. She tells me she has been to hell. Hundreds of thousands of people from throughout Mexico and Central America travel to Tijuana en route to the U.S. But only a few manage to penetrate the border; the rest wait and Tijuana grows. My cousin describes the Tijuana she saw. Jennifer the bureaucrat talks infrastructure; the city does not collect the garbage, deal with the sewage or provide clean water and schools for the people who live in cardboard huts. Jennifer of the soft heart describes poverty. She cannot filter out the aimless, hungry children, the hopeless adults. Jennifer the Mexican tells tales on herself—her argument with the drug-store cashier to get the twenty centavos change due her, everyone laughing, my stubborn cousin refusing to donate a penny to a multinational corporation, calculating the profits summed from dismissing the change for every transaction. Yes the numbers are scary.

Ms. Population argues that compounding the numbers is the fact that most immigrants move here for economic reasons. Once here their consumption patterns become Americanized and they create more of a drain on the global environment than if they had remained at home. Moreover most are not tied to the land; they come without an environmental ethic.

“My concern about economic immigrants is that . . . they don't have a relationship with their own environment. They haven't lived in a certain land. They don't have a marsh that they grew up in as a kid. They don't care about the natural environment. They're mostly concerned, and I can totally understand why, with bettering their standard of living, and the environment is just not an issue.”

I don't know about this. In the 1980s, my grandmother's neighborhood was condemned. Silicon Valley needed a bigger airport and she was in the middle of the traffic lanes. My grandmother, slowed by arthritis and a battle or two with cancer, tended her garden well past receipt of the city's third or fourth final notice. She left finally. Now the airplanes descend freely. The neighborhood is fenced. Family members make an occasional pilgrimage. When I make my own visit, slipping through a hole in the chain link, I do not think of borders. Most of the trees she planted are gone. The remaining flowers, like the rats, are wild.

When I shut off the tape recorder, Ms. Population asks me what I think of this issue. I begin with a pragmatic analysis of politics and the danger of alienating colored people from the environmental movement. I remind her that it is not immigrant Mexicans covering the highways with SUVs or displacing songbirds with 5000 square-foot ranchettes. They are busy picking hops and strawberries in the Willamette Valley, living

ten people to a house in Woodburn and Independence, lucky to have one car for an extended family.

But I return to home and ambivalence. The place I learned about home is no longer. There are too many people in California; it is difficult for me to return even for short visits. I cannot breathe there. So yes I take the idea of population seriously. And yet, I do not really believe in the border. The border is what distinguishes me from my Mexican grandparents. This is a distinction without historical or sensual truth. I relate all of this to Ms. Population, hoping she will understand, if not agree.

She looks at me and I read, "you don't get it." Maybe I don't; the border cannot be *my* answer. I thank her for her time; she leads me to the door. I walk outside, look at the late model cars speeding past and prepare to join them. I unlock my bike, strap on my helmet, and spin back down toward Portland. There is no bay breeze to cool my descent; I am no longer in California. There is nothing to do but pedal harder. I have a date with a tattoo artist.