



How Latinos Are Shaping



America's Future

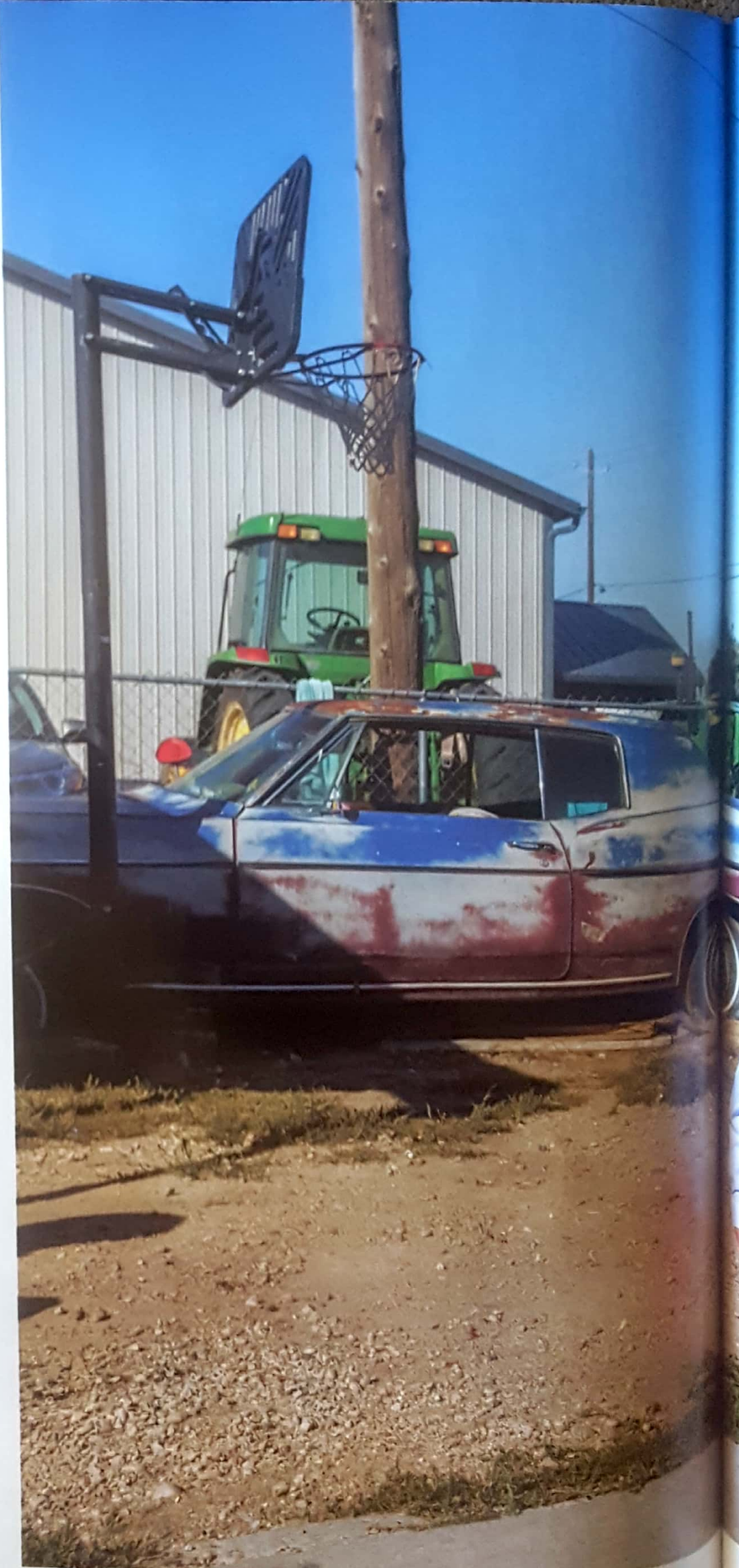
BY HÉCTOR TOBAR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARLA
GACHET AND IVAN KASHINSKY

Latinos came to Wilder, Idaho, as migrant farmworkers in the second half of the 20th century; today they're 76 percent of the population. Miguel Arredondo arrived in 1972 and still has his first American car, this scarred Chevy. His grandkids also live in Wilder; the bouncy castle is for their baptism celebration. Guests include Santiago Rojero and his son, Santiago Jr.

PREVIOUS PHOTO

Members of the Palmer Society, a campus women's organization, celebrate their graduation from Whittier College in California. The school—Richard Nixon's alma mater—now ranks among the most diverse colleges in the United States, and the town of Whittier is predominantly Latino and increasingly affluent.





Ismael Fernandez grew up in Wilder, Idaho, a town of 1,700 souls surrounded by tall hop plants and stubby alfalfa fields.

He lived with his grandparents in a home built on land where his grandfather, a Vietnam War veteran, once picked beets and onions.

When Fernandez was 19, he was elected to the city council. On his first day in office, in 2015, he stepped up to the short dais in Wilder City Hall and sat alongside the four other council members. A local reporter noticed something no one else had: There were five Spanish surnames on the council members' nameplates.

Elvis Navarrete, wearing a hat that his father brought from Nayarit state, Mexico, looks for weeds as he walks through an onion field. The children of those who arrived in Wilder as migrant farmworkers now work the same fields—but to them it's just a summer job.



Almazan. Rivera. Godina. Garcia. Fernandez. The story soon went national. For the first time ever in Idaho—a state where non-Hispanic whites make up 82 percent of the population—voters had elected an all-Latino city council.

Born in 1996 to farmworkers with roots in Mexico, Fernandez grew up hearing people describe him as Latino. The term spread in the last decades of the 20th century as a means of grouping together ethnically diverse peoples of Hispanic heritage: immigrants from Cuba and Guatemala, U.S.-born citizens with roots in Puerto Rico and Peru, and many others.

“Wilder is a small town, and it's a sleepy



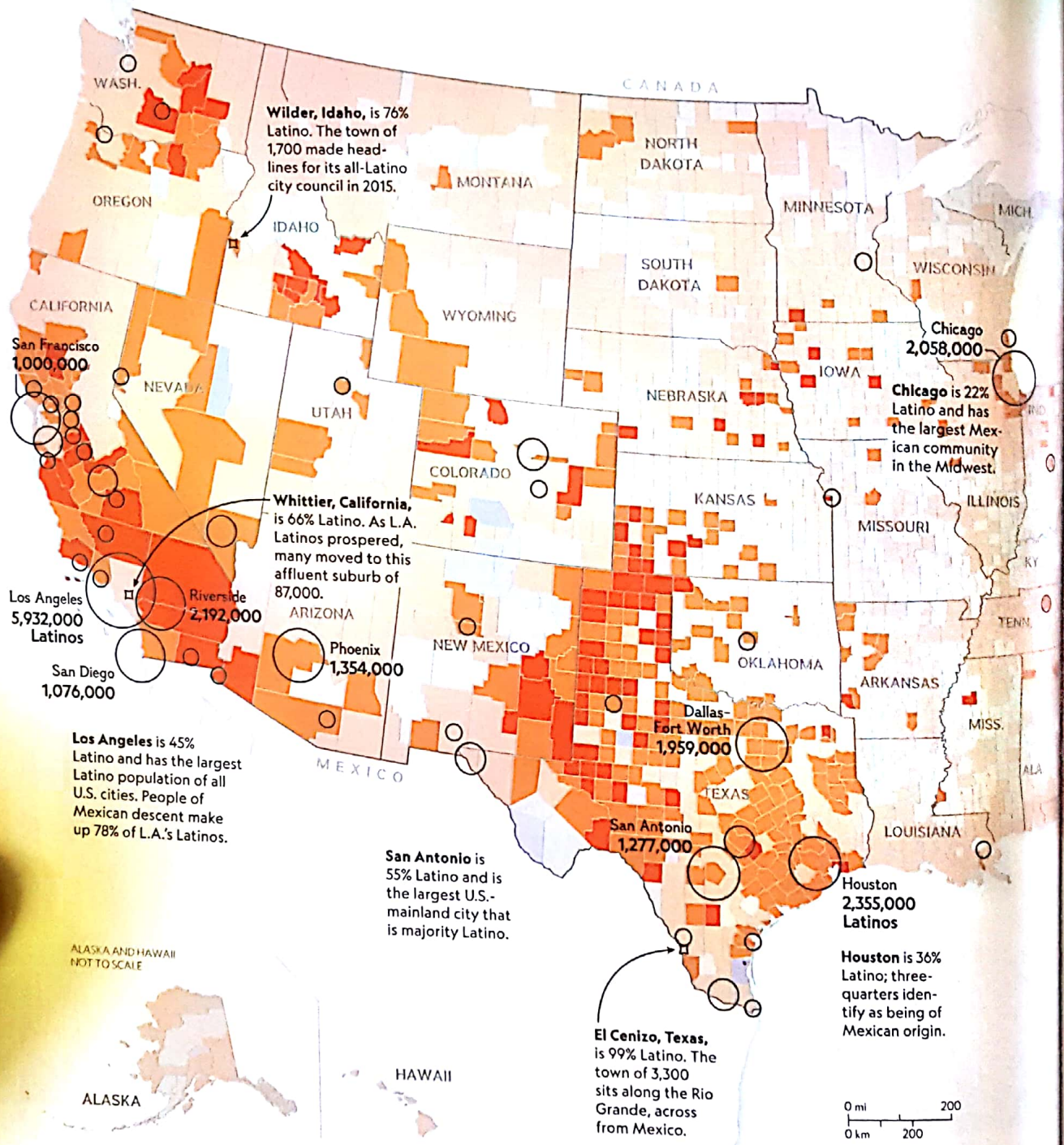
town,” Fernandez explained to some of the out-of-town reporters who visited. “Early in the morning and late in the evening, no matter what direction you go...north, south, west, east, you’re going to see fields and...people working. Mainly Latino, mainly of Mexican descent.”

Wilder, where Latinos now make up three-quarters of the population, has become an unlikely symbol of the rising influence of Latinos nationwide.

Every day the rest of the United States becomes a little more like Wilder. The nation’s Latino population has grown sixfold since 1970, reaching an estimated 57.4 million in 2016, or

nearly 18 percent of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In most places where the locals say a community “feels” different from what it did a generation ago, Latinos are the reason: They account for more of the nation’s demographic changes than any other group.

Because of this increase, the United States will become a “minority majority” country by the middle of this century. This dramatic reordering of the nation’s demographics has spawned anger and conflict, which some opportunistic politicians and media commentators have helped fuel by portraying whites as victims in an increasingly diverse United States. Such



critics, including President Donald Trump, often have cast Latinos as violent gang members, job stealers uninterested in learning English, and undocumented immigrants who come to the United States and have so-called anchor babies, children who are U.S. citizens at birth. Resentment about immigration—most of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are Latinos—helped fuel the political shifts that sent Trump to the White House.

Most Latino people in Wilder will tell you they've always gotten along well with their white neighbors. Things haven't changed much since

Trump was elected in 2016, they say. People with roots in Mexico are appreciated here because the farm economy couldn't exist without them.

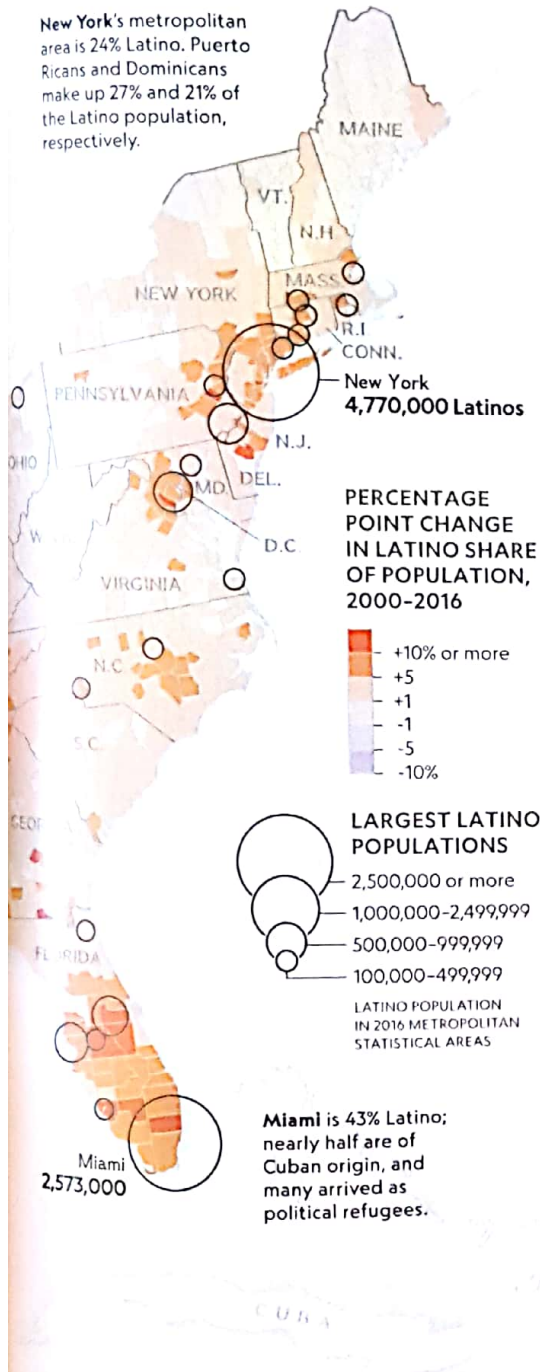
"This has always been known as the Mexican town," Adrián González, 40, told me from the front yard of his Wilder home, a block from a field where hop vines rise on V-shaped trellises. He was born in Texas, grew up speaking Spanish at home and English at school, and came to Idaho to join Mexican-American relatives working in the fields: "We topped onions, detasseled corn, blocked sugar beets."

A similar need for laborers is reshaping the

New York's metropolitan area is 24% Latino. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans make up 27% and 21% of the Latino population, respectively.

Expanding Latinidad

The Spanish word "Latinidad," which loosely translates as "Latino-ness," is a term that strives to encompass the shared cultural identity of millions of Latinos who are of different races and national origins and who live in the United States. According to the U.S. census, the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" represent the 57.4 million who hail from a host of countries south of the U.S. border and in the Caribbean, as well as Spain. Latinos officially became the largest U.S. minority in 2000. Since then their Latinidad has continued to thrive in urban and rural areas.



Diverse origins

Many Latinos prefer to identify with the place of their family's origin, rather than with terms such as "Latino" or "Hispanic."

- Native-born U.S. citizens
- Foreign-born U.S. citizens
- Non-U.S. citizens

EACH SQUARE REPRESENTS 100,000 PEOPLE.

Mexico



Puerto Rico (U.S.)



Cuba



El Salvador



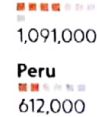
Dominican Republic



Guatemala



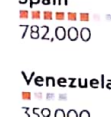
Colombia



Honduras



Spain



Ecuador



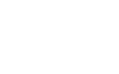
Peru



Nicaragua



Venezuela



All others



This U.S. territory is 99% Latino. All people born in Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens.

demographics and culture of rural areas nationwide. And big cities such as Miami, New York, Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles are now home to millions of Latinos who reflect a broad economic spectrum and, as in Wilder, are taking on leadership roles in their communities.

I GREW UP as the son of Guatemalan immigrants in Los Angeles, which now has a Latino plurality. Like people in Wilder, L.A. residents of Latino descent pepper Spanish into their speech, even if English is their native tongue. They make comfort food from beans and corn masa; they go to church

to praise Dios, and they call their daughters *mija* (a portmanteau of *mi hija*, my daughter).

Latinos in Los Angeles vote too, electing pro-immigrant representatives and helping make California (a state that once elected Ronald Reagan governor) among the most pro-Democrat of the 50 states. The mayor of Los Angeles and the leaders of both houses of the state legislature are of Latin American descent.

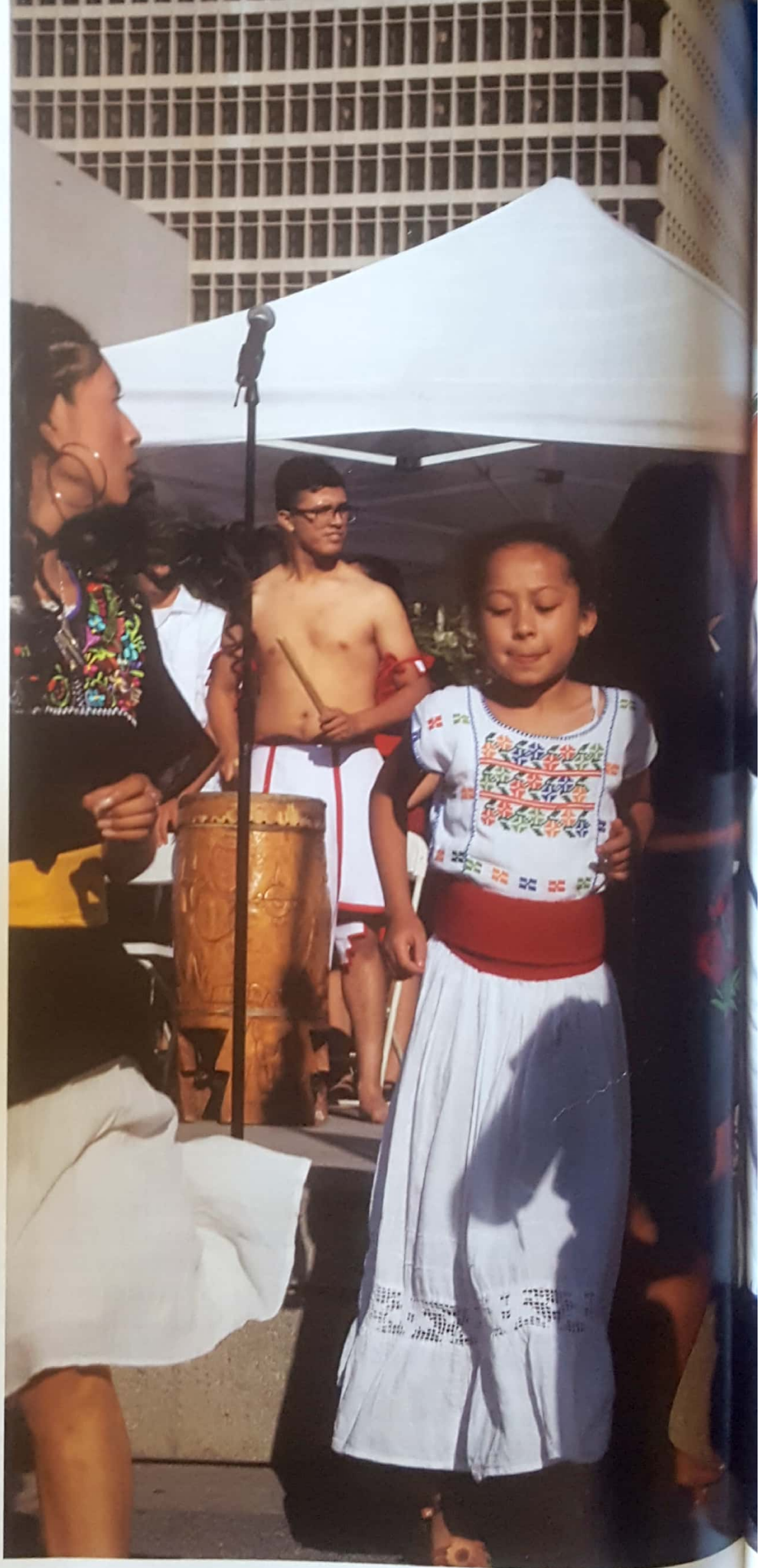
Over the decades I've seen traditions such as Cinco de Mayo spread across the country to heartland towns such as Garden City, Kansas; Lexington, Nebraska; and Wilder, Idaho.

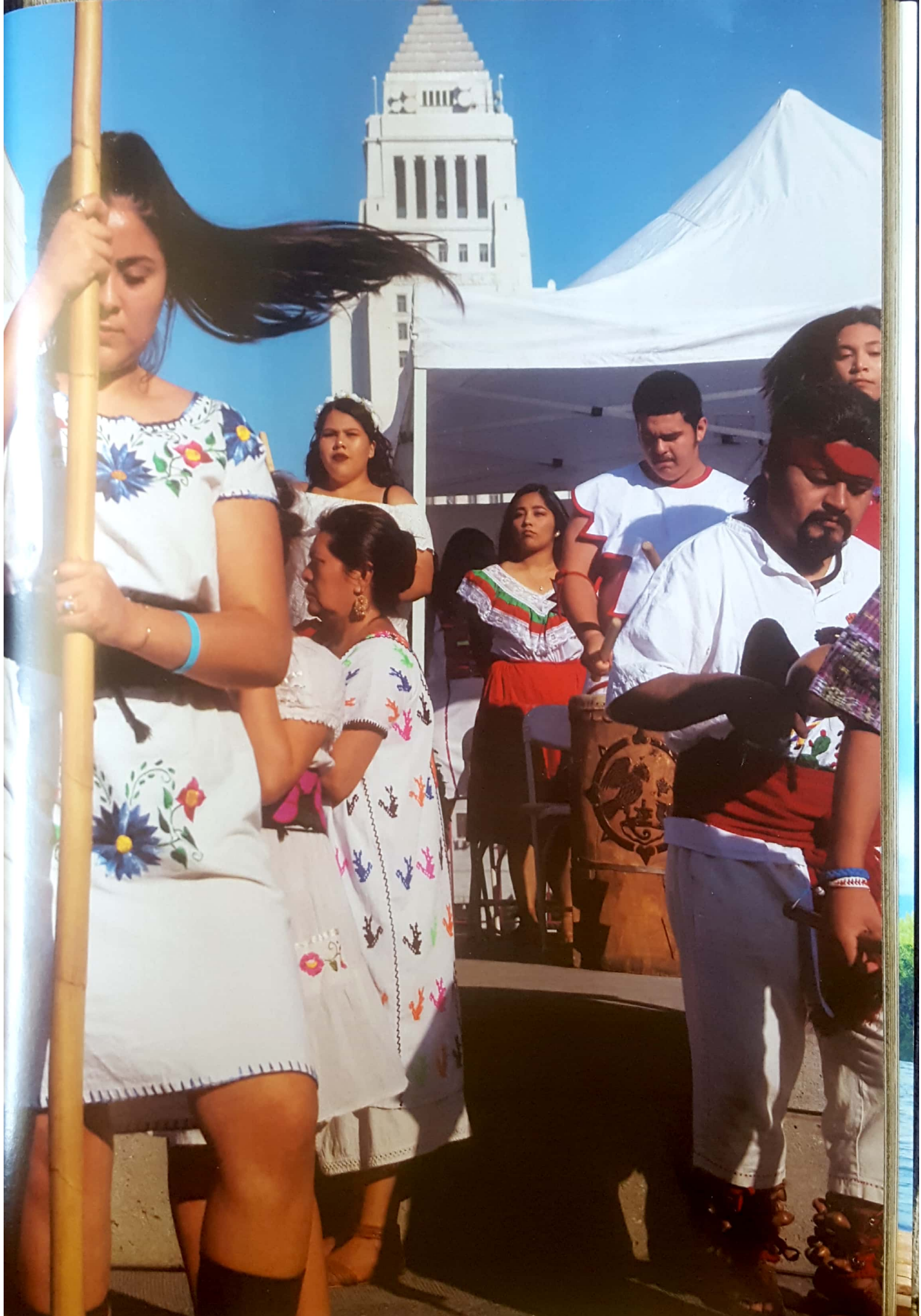
RILEY D. CHAMPINE, NGM STAFF SOURCES: PEW RESEARCH CENTER; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU; INTEGRATED PUBLIC USE MICRODATA SERIES; NATIONAL HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEM; UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Ceremonial dancing is part of the Anahuacalmecac International University Preparatory's graduation-day celebration in downtown Los Angeles. The K-12 public charter school emphasizes knowledge of indigenous culture. Students learn Nahuatl (Aztec) in addition to English and Spanish. As part of their math lessons, they study a traditional computation system called *nepohualtzintzin*.

NEXT PHOTO

Philanthropists Rebecca (center) and Richard Zapanta (left), a surgeon, founded Los Compadres, a charity that supports Children's Hospital Los Angeles. Each year they fund events for very ill patients, often coming-of-age parties such as *quinceañeras*, which commemorate a girl's 15th birthday.





The city council in Wilder meets in a former bank that serves as city hall. Members say they rarely, if ever, discuss questions of cultural identity.

“People ask me, ‘As a Hispanic, how are you going to help Hispanics?’” says Mayor Alicia Almazan, a hair stylist who grew up working alongside her father in Idaho fields. “This is not what we’re about.” Her mission, she explains, is to help all of Wilder’s residents.

At the same time, the mayor is proud of her heritage. Her Spanish-speaking father taught her “to stand up for yourself no matter what...and never back down.” She repeats a phrase he’d say in Spanish: “*Nunca se va a rajar, ninguno de mis hijos.*” None of my kids will ever break.

LIKE OTHER PLACES in the United States, western Idaho is a cultural crossroads. Spanish-surnamed people first came from Mexico and South Texas to live in Wilder in large numbers during the second half of the 20th century. They were following annual migrant-worker routes, and each

year most would leave once the snow began to fall. When a few decided to stay, the local Latino community was born.

“We were very cold—in a trailer, without heat, and with a baby boy,” Alejandro Bravo, 40, says of his family’s first winters in Wilder. Bravo works full-time for a local farmer during the week. On the weekends he’s a pastor who leads a Spanish-language service in Wilder’s Methodist church. The lessons he’s learned on his journey to Idaho from Guadalajara, Mexico, are reflected in his sermons. “*Sufrimos, batallamos,*” he says. We suffered, we battled.

Among the major ethnic or racial identities in the United States—white, black, Asian, Native American—Latino is the most amorphous. Latino people can be African, Mesoamerican, Asian, or white. They are evangelical, Roman Catholic, and Jewish. I am of Maya Indian heritage, but like many Latino people over 50, I have “white” listed as my race on my birth certificate.

What “Latino” means, more than anything, is that you are part of a story that links you to other



people with roots in a southern place: Ecuador or El Salvador, for example. Or maybe an old Southwestern town founded by Spaniards, such as Española, New Mexico. More than likely this story involves the journey a migrant made in search of work and opportunity.

IN LOS ANGELES, the great sprawling metropolis centered on what was once an outpost of the Spanish Empire, Latino people still think of labor, migration, hardship, and resilience as the qualities that define them and tie them together.

I grew up with my parents' stories of their journey from Guatemala to the one-room apartment in Los Angeles, where I was born and raised. We slowly rose into the middle class, moving eastward every few years—from crowded East Hollywood to newer, roomier suburbs such as Whittier.

Countless Latino residents of Greater Los Angeles followed in my family's footsteps. Once confined to barrios in East L.A. and Boyle Heights, Latino communities have spread to almost every corner of the metropolis.

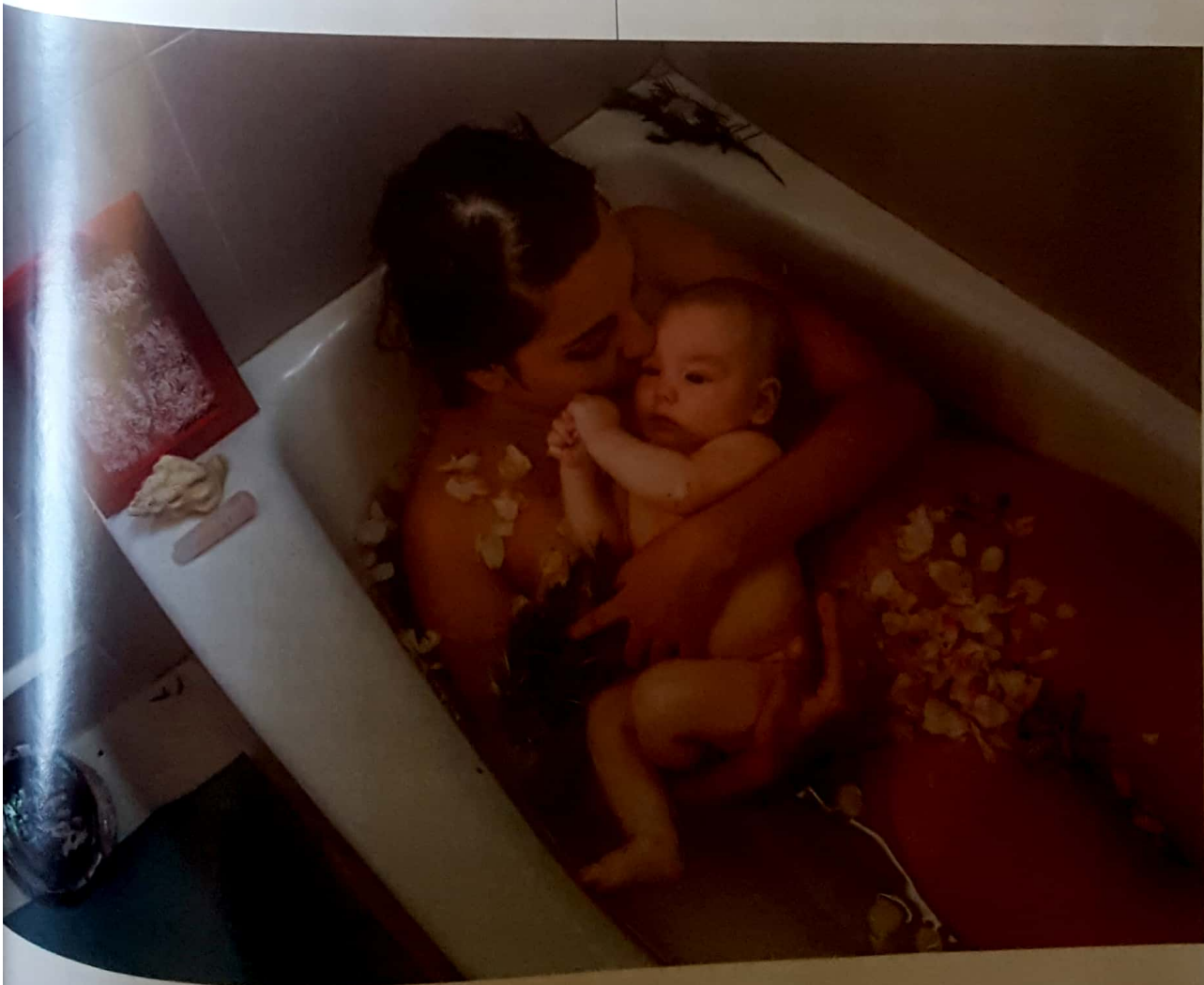
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LEFT

Mariachi Negrete performs at a birthday party in Compton, California. The group, founded by Guillermo Negrete from Michoacán, Mexico, and now led by his son, Rodrigo, has been playing together for 20 years. On some days the band performs at multiple house parties in the Los Angeles area.

RIGHT

Laura Sermeño and her baby boy celebrate the end of her *cuarentena*, or quarantine. The tradition, common throughout Latin America, requires new mothers to rest under the care of their relatives for some 40 days after childbirth. The period ends with a mother-child herbal bath and a massage.



At the southern end of Los Angeles, in the oil-refinery and port community of Wilmington, I met the family of Luz Gomez. Three languages are spoken at the Gomez home: English, Spanish, and Zapotec. Luz, 17, is a U.S. citizen who's grown up following Zapotec Indian traditions. At celebrations in Los Angeles, she dons the woven skirt and blouse worn by women in her parents' hometown—San Bartolomé Quialana, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, a place she first visited this year. "When people say 'Latino,' they think 'Mexican,'" Luz told me. "I call myself Oaxacan."

Her father, Fidel, came to the U.S. as a teen. When his first American daughter was born, he gave her two names: Luz, which is Spanish for "light," and Zithviani, Zapotec for "far away." "So my name means 'light from far away,'" she says. And each fall Luz's mother, Lola, marks the Day of the Dead, el Día de los Muertos, with traditions of her Oaxacan ancestors: cooking special dishes and building an altar in the living room with marigolds, votive candles, and photos of the departed.

IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA el Día de los Muertos is a modern symbol of Latinidad, or Latino-ness, for millions of people. Many are lifelong Americans like me who grew up speaking English.

In Whittier fifth-grade teacher Yolanda Garcia noticed her students did better when their lessons had Latino themes. Learning about their culture and history made them feel smarter. She sensed that this hunger for Latino culture had commercial potential too—so she started a store, Casita del Pueblo, in Whittier's Uptown in 2004.

Later, with the blessing of Whittier officials, Garcia launched a Day of the Dead festival in a nearby park. The festival now takes up a dozen city blocks on an October weekend.

Whittier has become a mecca of the Latino middle class, a transformation few locals could have imagined a generation ago. I grew up in South Whittier—an unincorporated, down-market community nearby—and knew Whittier as a place where white people lived. Richard Nixon went to high school there.

These days some very affluent Latino families live in Whittier, including Richard and Rebecca Zapanta. Their 12,000-square-foot home in the city's Beverly Hills Estates resembles an Italian villa. They've filled it with paintings and other works by many of Mexico's master artists, including Rafael Coronel and Frida Kahlo.

Richard grew up in the barrios of East Los

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Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s, but he had no real, living connection to Mexico. "I'm fourth-generation Mexican American," he told me. After he became a successful surgeon, he traveled to the land of his ancestors again and again. His Spanish improved, a skill that was useful when he met Mexican artists.

The Zapanta home is also filled with photographs of Latino politicians they know, many of whom have risen to national prominence. Among them: Antonio Villaraigosa, who was Los Angeles's mayor for two terms, and Hilda Solis, a former U.S. congresswoman who was labor secretary during President Barack Obama's second term.

When Rebecca was first dating Richard, she says, "We started off with \$10, eating menudo at *Ciro's*," a humble Eastside eatery. Before Obama left office, Secretary Solis invited Rebecca to a state dinner at the White House.

IN THE LATINO communities of Southern California, it is the best of times, and the most difficult.

I live in a hillside home with beautiful views near the Los Angeles River, where the real estate boom has pushed the value of some properties past one million dollars. A short downhill walk from my home, undocumented immigrants live and work.

In February 2017, less than a mile from my neighborhood, Romulo Avelica-Gonzalez was driving his U.S.-born daughter Fatima to school when immigration agents suddenly descended upon the family. Her mother told Fatima, then 13, to record the arrest on her cell phone. "I was sad, and at the same time I was mad, because they were taking my dad away from me," she told me.

The Avelicas have roots in a seaside town in the Mexican state of Nayarit, but they've lived in Los Angeles for a quarter century. For months after Romulo's arrest, Fatima and her family visited him in an immigration facility. In the meantime the video she'd shot of her father's

arrest had gone viral. "Now people know what the president is doing," she says, referring to the Trump administration's aggressive deportation policies. "He's tearing families apart because he thinks they're criminals."

Romulo was released from detention six months later. He returned to the Eastside and made tacos for the friends and strangers who'd fought for his release and had won—thanks in large measure to Fatima's video.

Romulo has lived in the U.S. long enough to have grandchildren born in America. With plans to revamp the nation's immigration system stalled in Congress, the presence of millions of undocumented Latino men and women is becoming a permanent feature of American life; they are now as much a part of the nation's social fabric as softball and summer camp. But the ever stricter enforcement of immigration laws has changed the feel of daily life in many Latino communities. The impact is seen most dramatically along the 1,900-mile U.S.-Mexico border.

THE SLOW RIVER that separates Mexico from the United States is a mirror of calm water less than 100 yards wide when it passes the quiet border town of El Cenizo, Texas—population 3,300. If Trump's proposed border wall were built here, it would run past a city playground near the riverbank and the open field where Fermín Longoria stopped recently to feed his brother's horses.

"I don't think that wall will ever be put here," Longoria told me in Spanish.

El Cenizo is 99 percent Latino. People of Mexican descent have long lived here and crossed easily back and forth between the two countries. In 1999 the city passed a sanctuary law protecting undocumented immigrants. "Two Cultures, One Great City" is El Cenizo's motto. The local school is named for two heroes, one U.S.-born and one Mexican: Kennedy-Zapata Elementary.

El Cenizo gets its name from a sagebrush that grows along the Rio Grande Valley. People here used to work on the onion and melon farms nearby, but those crops were abandoned years ago, forcing many to travel hundreds of miles in search of jobs. And yet many residents remain proud to call the mostly Spanish-speaking town home. "You never have to lock your doors here," Salomon Torres-Martínez, 63, told me. He built a home in El Cenizo from scratch, assembling materials gradually, "like a bird building a nest."

When immigrants pass by his house after

crossing the river on rafts, Torres-Martínez responds the way most other El Cenizo residents do: He looks the other way.

In recent years tougher enforcement has made immigrant smugglers a more dangerous, desperate breed. "Now they're starting to carry guns," resident Carlos Coronado told me. An increased U.S. Border Patrol presence also has frightened many in El Cenizo: Mayor Raul Reyes estimates one in five residents may be undocumented.

In 2017 Reyes filed suit to stop enforcement of a new Texas law that would force local police to cooperate with immigration authorities. Reyes, a registered Democrat, announced he would be willing to take the fight all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Reyes first ran for office in El Cenizo at age 19—just like Ismael Fernandez, the young city councilman in Wilder, Idaho, except Fernandez ran as a Republican.

Growing up in rural Idaho, Fernandez once told his grandmother that he might be the first Latino president. It didn't seem impossible, given how driven he was. He often engaged in political debates with his more liberal older sister, Mariza. "I want to change people's minds by doing stuff," he told her.

He studied practical things such as sewer and water systems. A state legislator appointed him her alternate; he was empowered to cast votes when she was absent from the Capitol in nearby Boise. It was a great honor for a 20-year-old, and more seemed sure to follow. But just days after the appointment, on January 27, 2017, Ismael Fernandez died in a car accident outside Wilder. His sister and grandmother chose a small obelisk as his grave marker—it reminded them of the Washington Monument. "You know he would love that," his sister says. Young Ismael had been a history buff who put a framed copy of the U.S. Constitution on his bedroom wall. "I want to be talked about for ages to come," he once told her. "I want to leave something behind."

Today that obelisk stands as a monument to a local hero of the Latino community: a young man who went to city hall to make his hometown a better place to live and who believed a Latino family with roots in Mexico could leave a permanent mark on the United States of America. □

Héctor Tobar is a veteran journalist and the author of four books. Photographers **Karla Gachet** and **Ivan Kashinsky** have worked throughout the Americas. All three are based in Los Angeles.