Home Is Where the Border Is

LIVING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES FORCES YOU TO RETHINK YOUR DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY

BY FELIPE HINOJOSA

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As soon as I spot the rows of palm trees lining Highway 77, I know I’ve arrived home. That’s the point where I roll down my windows to feel the humid and hot winds of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. When I did just that on a recent trip from College Station, where I live now, my 9-year-old son asked loudly from the back seat, “Papi, why does it smell like steak?” My response was swift: “Because Friday night lights, mijo.”

Where I grew up, we barbecue on beautiful fall Friday nights. We watch football, we dance, and without question we get dressed to the nines in shiny boots, tight jeans, and colorful shirts. You don’t have to be from here to appreciate the sights and smells of Friday nights in South Texas.

But you do have to move beyond the anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican narratives that drive many outsiders to fear my homeland. The dominant narrative about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands goes something like this: It is drug-infested, violent, and possibly overrun by terrorists and “illegal” immigrants here to take American jobs. Such is the rhetoric of talking heads eager to cast the region as quintessentially un-American and in need of a massive wall to be “secured.”

My desire to challenge these misconceptions and tell a more accurate story is why I became a historian of the Latino experience in the U.S. in the first place. I fell in love with the study of history because it helped me situate my story—and others like mine—into the larger flow of American history. History also gave me a view of the borderlands—with its regional variations, foods, corridos, and Spanglish—that help project a vision of what the future might hold in store. Rooted in interethnic conflict, class polarization, cross-border family bonds, and visions of new and emerging identities, the borderlands have defied easy definition ever since that arbitrary zigzag of a line was established in 1848. What is clear is that the making of the borderlands raised important questions about race, westward expansion, and slavery that helped trigger our country’s Civil War. Since then, the culture and commerce of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have tested our nation’s democratic principles, especially around citizenship and belonging. The place is still a contested and creative zone where a new vision of America is being born.

What do I mean? Well, let me tell you my story. I grew up with five sisters and one brother in a home full of Bibles, the music of the Bee Gees, arroz con pollo y frijoles, and tortillas de harina (rice with chicken and beans, and flour tortillas). I was born and raised in Brownsville, right on the southernmost tip of Texas. Our house was about a 15-minute walk to el puente, the bridge you can walk or drive across into the Mexican border town of Matamoros. When I was a teenager, my friends and I went to Matamoros for dance clubs that sold you alcohol, no questions asked, and for the taquerias with those fabulously addictive taquitos norteños—small tortillas filled with steak, onion, and cilantro, topped with queso cotija.
If Friday nights were about football, then Saturday nights were about drinking and dancing to Green Day, Kumbia Kings, and Maná. Don’t ask me how we crossed back into the U.S., how it could be that U.S. Customs officials asked a bunch of drunk teenagers: “Are you American citizens?” only to pass us on through into the streets of Brownsville. *Era todo un desmadre.* (In English: It was pure chaos.)

But this was the 1990s, before the drug violence on the other side, *del otro lado,* made such festive cross-border forays less routine. Back then, crossing the border to party was just something we did on Saturday night. Sunday mornings, of course, meant going to church. With a slight headache and bloodshot eyes, I spent one hour in Sunday school, followed by another hour and a half of singing, prayers, and preaching. Once it ended, we all quickly made our way home to watch God’s team, the Dallas Cowboys.

Now, while most of my friends went to one of the many Catholic churches in Brownsville, I went to the only Mennonite church in town—the church my parents started in 1971. They were introduced to the Mennonite church in the 1960s when they circled the migrant stream across the Midwest from Michigan to Ohio picking cherries, tomatoes, and sugar beets. It was hard, backbreaking work, which is one of the reasons why faith mattered so much to my parents and to the many families they met on the road and in the fields.

Joining the Mennonite church was without question an odd move for my parents since Mennonites are an ethno-religious group with strong Swiss German or Eastern European roots. Neither the peace theology nor the church’s cautious relationship with government and society appealed to my parents. But Mennonites were the only Protestant group to hold Spanish-language Bible studies for migrant workers in northwestern Ohio. That alone was enough to win my mother’s heart.

My parents’ church, *Iglesia Menonita del Cordero,* looked nothing like a traditional Mennonite church. We were a Mexican-American and working-class congregation that felt just as comfortable practicing Pentecostal revivalism as we did singing traditional hymns accompanied by an electric guitar and a drum set. Our church had more in common with the Evangelical threads of mainline Protestantism and Pentecostalism that have served as sanctuaries of support for more than a century for Latinos from Houston to Los Angeles. But we did mirror white Mennonite churches in our strong belief in community service. For that, the church built a gymnasium with concrete walls and asphalt tile for barrio youth to play basketball four nights a week. And boy did we play.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when refugees from Central America were making their way to the U.S. to escape war and violence in their home countries, our church gym turned into a refugee sanctuary for 50 to 100 people at a time. Regardless, we kept playing. For a few hours every night, Mexican-Americans and Central Americans played basketball, all part of the same hemispheric barrio: trash talk, high-fives, and guys playing in jeans rolled up at the bottom. We taught them Spanglish, and they taught us words in Spanish none of us had ever heard. While I can hardly remember any of the sermons that my father preached, I will never forget those basketball games and the conversations that I had with people whose lives were caught in a political struggle to survive.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley is by no means perfect. We have our share of problems, no question. But one of the things that I love about the people of South Texas is our resolve to not take things lying down, “*de no ser dejado*[s]” as the folklorist and Brownsville native Américo Paredes so eloquently put it. I
love our penchant for living in the moment, for laughing loud and hard at injustice, and for not being afraid of crossing borders and inhabiting multiple spaces. As a Mexican-American and a Mennonite, I feel equally at home in South Texas and in the American Midwest.

We could use a little more of a “border crossing” mentality throughout our society these days. We’re in a moment when our country is changing, when all of us are walking into a new global reality, and it can feel like rabid anti-Latino sentiment is everywhere (from “Where’s your green card?” taunts aimed at Kansas State basketball player Angel Rodriguez to the protestors in Murrieta, California, who gathered to shout “go back home” to a bus full of Central American families).

I think my barrio—the Lower Rio Grande Valley—can teach us a few things. Even as the region inspires cultural exchange, it also demands that its inhabitants respect the struggles, pitfalls, and missteps that come with being part of a vibrant and diverse community. The borderlands force us to reconsider the meaning of community by reminding us that diverse communities thrive in the spaces between solidarity and estrangement. But most importantly, the borderlands demonstrate how that quintessentially American quality—optimism—comes not from naïveté, but from struggle, and from knowing our own stories. Living in a diverse and complex world demands that we all be comfortable with who we are, and thus better positioned to cross the economic, racial, religious, and gendered borders of our own lives.
“Scarlett, Scarlett!” I waved pleadingly. Across the red carpet she sauntered, her eyes invitingly meeting mine. There I stood—a 24-year-old Jewish kid from Chicago decked out for the 77th Annual Academy Awards with my overgrown eyebrows and a cheap rented tux—face-to-face with America’s luscious girl-next-door, Scarlett Johansson.

I had been waiting all year to ask her this question: “What do you have to say to your fans in Japan?” She cocked her head with a half-smile and then answered teasingly, “Well, I miss them.” “We miss you, too!” I yelled back as she turned and walked away.

Coming from someone who looked like me, the question must have seemed “lost in translation.” But I was just doing my job. I was working for Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan’s largest newspaper. With more than 10 million daily readers, Yomiuri actually boasts the highest circulation of any daily in the world.

In the winter of 2002, back when I had never heard of Yomiuri Shimbun, I was just another lost history major living at home in Chicago after graduating from Stanford. I desperately wanted to move back to California, so I started applying for every job I could find. That’s when I first heard of Yomiuri Shimbun—on Monster.com. The paper had an opening for a reporter who would work alongside its Japanese Los Angeles bureau chief. Somehow, despite having no experience in journalism, I got the job.

The Los Angeles bureau covered the American West. I reported breaking news, politics, entertainment, and features. My reporting would mostly be incorporated into dispatches from the bureau chief, Kiyoshi Morita, whom everyone warmly called Mr. Morita. I also wrote for their English language paper, The Daily Yomiuri.

The bureau was small. Mr. Morita directly supervised two of us American reporters. A sportswriter from Japan also covered baseball with the help of another American reporter. Most of Yomiuri’s U.S. coverage came from its New York and Washington bureaus. In L.A., we were often looked to for features, which didn’t always run daily.

When we weren’t on deadline, we ate. Our meals became a sort of family tradition. Our Japanese colleagues often invited their wives and others from the Japanese expat community. For them, Los Angeles was the anti-Tokyo. They hardly wore a tie. But it was also an enclave of Japan in America. On my first day, I was welcomed with an extravagant dinner in Little Tokyo. Afterwards, the men went out to drink; the women went home.

We drank Sapporo at Japanese beer gardens. We shared sushi, donburi, and ramen feasts. We sang karaoke. (Mr. Morita taught me to sing a ballad to his native Osaka—in Japanese.)
Yet the border between Japanese and American—let alone Japanese-American—was far more fluid than our pseudo-Tokyo nightlife might suggest. In fact, working in a community with roots in Asia helped me better understand my own family’s experience of America. Our travel agent—an “Issei” (what Japanese-Americans call an immigrant)—spoke longingly about the rice and fish in her native Japan in the same way my mother—an Israeli-born “Issei” to America—spoke about the tomatoes and cucumbers of her youth.

My two American co-workers, like me, were “Nisei” (what Japanese-Americans call the first generation of immigrants born in America) from Japan and China, respectively. We grew up as a bridge between America and our parents’ homelands. I always felt American, but perhaps not fully so. “American” was alternatingly used in our home to describe both the familiar and the foreign, what defined us and what we set us apart. The differences I shared with my “Nisei” coworkers—from what our parents cooked to whom they hoped we married—made me feel more completely American than I ever had before.

In this shared sense of difference, we were not alone. Like Los Angeles itself, our lives were woven into a larger tapestry of communities.

Los Angeles was built as much by refugees as by the car or the movies. Armenian survivors came after genocide, Ethiopians after famine. Mexicans (those who weren’t already there before the border crossed them) came after revolution. Central Americans fled civil wars, as did Chinese and Koreans. Persians escaped the Iranian revolution. The contractor who did our IT at Yomiuri had served in the South Vietnamese Army.

Japanese immigrants, for their part, first came to California in the 1860s during the Meiji Restoration, when the country rapidly modernized in response to its forced opening by Commodore Perry in 1854. The community grew until Congress passed the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924—before expanding again after World War II.


I saw this fusion develop—in some small way—in myself: At the office, I alternated picking up the phone with a polite “Moshi moshi,” or a simple “Hello.” At Japanese restaurants, I got waiters’ attention by shouting “Sumimasen!” Curry katsu reminded me of my grandmother’s chicken schnitzel—swapping the potatoes for rice and adding a better sauce.

My sister found a picture of me in kindergarten—dressed in a kimono, with golden blond hair, waving the flag of the rising sun—from my Jewish school’s “International Day.” It hung above my desk.

Working for Yomiuri from 2003 until 2006, I also had the chance to cover every state west of the Mississippi except for North Dakota. Mr. Morita’s favorite state was New Mexico. We ate fried bread outside Taos Pueblo—the oldest continually inhabited settlement in America, then drove in search of ranches owned by Julia Roberts, Dennis Hopper—and Donald Rumsfeld. In Santa Fe, we visited Georgia O’Keefe’s sunflowers and watched the sunrise over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. We drove down the spine of I-25, following the Rio Grande past towns like Elephant Butte, Truth or Consequences, and Las Cruces. We arrived in El Paso to report on a war story from Fort Bliss.
Later, I drove to the Trinity nuclear test site in the heart of New Mexico for the 60th anniversary of the moment when, on July 16, 1945, man had “become death, the destroyer of worlds.” The sand was still turned to glass.

Our reporting was not always quite that serious. We covered *The Wizard of Oz* in Kansas, *Field of Dreams* in Iowa, and Route 66. Mr. Morita and I were a strange sight covering the rodeo.

We twice interviewed Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, known among Japanese by the endearing term “Schwa-chan.” At the Michael Jackson trial, crazed fans danced as the King of Pop jumped atop his SUV—even as his talent, and an acquittal, did not fully obscure a dark past.

“The past is never dead, it’s not even past,” William Faulkner said of the South. That’s true for the entire country.

My first big assignment was covering President George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech. In a fancy San Diego hotel, I gorged on an endless buffet alongside the White House press corps as the president flew out to the USS Abraham Lincoln to have his USS Missouri moment. Two years later, I watched the president again in San Diego mark the 60th anniversary of the end of war with Japan. Standing next to the USS Ronald Reagan, he said that Iraq would be transformed from enemy to friend, just like Japan had. Hurricane Katrina had crashed ashore in the Gulf Coast that morning. He barely mentioned it.

In Hawaii, we interviewed Senator Daniel Inouye. He served in World War II as part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team—an all Japanese-American unit that remains the most decorated in American history. Many of its members volunteered at U.S. internment camps. When Inouye left for war, his father told him that if he must die for his country, “do so with honor.” He nearly did, losing an arm fighting in Italy.

Afterwards, Mr. Morita and I visited the USS Arizona memorial where “tears” of black oil still well up from a wreck entombed with the dead. Mr. Morita bemoaned that most Japanese visitors to Hawaii did not come here. I told him I believed most American visitors did not come either.

Sometimes, to be a reporter is to bear witness to tragedy. At the Red Lake Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota, a 16-year-old shooter killed 10 people—mostly classmates. Wailing rose above the beat of drums at the memorial. As a “foreign” correspondent, was I supposed to treat this horror as a human tragedy or as a quintessentially American one? I’m still not sure.

For another story, the beatnik poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, hand running through his dignified white beard, told me about coming ashore in Nagasaki as a young naval officer as “bleached-white bones” stuck through the ashes.

For me, this searing movable feast—this eye-opening American education, courtesy of the Japanese newspaper subscriber—eventually came to an end. I had my fill.

I wanted to continue finding myself, this time by working directly in diplomacy—hoping that I could help prevent us from becoming lost in translation again.
Learning the Twist in New Delhi

GROWING UP AMERICAN IN INDIA INSTILLED IN ME A DEEP CURIOSITY ABOUT FOREIGN LANDS—INCLUDING MY OWN

BY LEE WOODMAN

DECEMBER 9, 2014

I grew up in India from the age of 4 to 14. Every two years, my family traveled back to the States on “home leave.” Via Europe or through Hong Kong and Japan, we’d head across the oceans to visit our cousins in New York and our grandparents in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Curious relatives and friends back home would ask: Do you speak Hindu? (The language is Hindi.) Do you know snake charmers? (No, but we see many on the streets, and they perform at birthday parties along with other performers like dancing bears and flip-jumping monkeys.) Have you seen the Taj Mahal? (Yes, it’s hard to miss.) Have you ridden an elephant? (Yes, and camels too; but camels drool and growl.)

Americans weren’t the only ones brimming with questions. Whenever I returned from the States, Indian acquaintances asked: Where is New England? What religion are you? (My family is third-generation Unitarian.) Is your father rich? (This is complicated … by Maharajah standards? By slum standards? We were certainly privileged, but more so in terms of housing and travel than money.)

Seeming exotic to natives of both countries meant that I had a lot of time to think about what an American is, and how others see Americans. It readied me—and my parents—for a life of questions.

My dad and mom were adventuresome and curious. They first moved our family overseas in 1950 to France. My father was on a visiting professorship in Strasbourg through the Fulbright program, while my mother, my sister, and I lived in Paris due to political unrest in Strasbourg. My parents jumped at the chance to go to Madras (now known as Chennai) in 1952, when my father was offered a post as cultural affairs officer for the United States Information Service (USIS), an agency meant to introduce the U.S. to the host country. Two years later, we all moved to New Delhi when my father joined the Ford Foundation as an education specialist.

Our life in Delhi was normal to us, but hardly a normal American life. We had a houseful of servants, and others (a tailor, clothes washer, and night watchman) who came in to do their work on a regular basis. My mom—a trained ballet dancer—set up a dance school in New Delhi and served as hostess for hundreds of visitors a year: diplomats, artists, businessmen, and even athletes from around the world—and from the neighborhood.

I attended a Catholic day school in Madras, then went to the American International School in Delhi through ninth grade. While my older sister Betsy went to boarding school in the Himalayas, staying in the bustling city had great appeal since I was an avid dancer—trained by my mom and a Broadway show dancer, Richard, who took over her school in later years. I also studied Bharatnatyam (traditional Indian dance) at the well-known Treveni Kala Sangam arts center in Delhi.
The American International School was housed in old Indian Army barracks and attracted not only American kids whose families spent two-year diplomatic stints in India, but also a mix of Indian, Canadian, Vietnamese, German, Swedish, British, and Dutch kids. From these classmates and my teachers, new words not often used in the American lexicon took their place in my speech: “lorries” for trucks, “frocks” for dresses, and “full-stops” for periods at the end of sentences. Instead of American history, we studied Asian and world history. We could draw any mountain range on the Asian, African, or European continents, but the Rockies or the Appalachians? Not so much.

I loved the stories from the more recent American arrivals about life back home—they regaled us with tales of Dairy Queens, sock hops, and basketball games (we simulated, at their direction, a cheerleading squad decked out with short swing skirts and pom-poms). To keep up with our beloved but not-so-well-known America, we listened obsessively to Voice of America radio transmissions and Radio Ceylon, which had a dedications show. Young lovers could profess their devotion by dedicating songs to each other by Ricky Nelson, Elvis, and others. And boy, did we make sure we knew how to twist.

My parents’ orbit not only drew us into embassy softball games; we also got a close-up view of presidential visits to India. My parents were on duty when Eisenhower, Nixon, and Kennedy came through. I remember bursting with pride as I waved “I like IKE” posters, and my heart pounded when we all recited the Pledge of Allegiance together, always ending with “and I pledge respect to the country of which I am a guest.” (I only found out when I returned to the U.S. that schoolchildren in America didn’t say this, too.)

My parents were fiercely loyal Americans, and they wanted us to display the kinds of American values they thought were truly important. The book *The Ugly American* was published while we were in India, propagating the notion of loud, bullying, materialistic, and power-obsessed Americans traipsing around the world. My parents felt the burden not to validate the stereotype. We were *not* to speak too loudly or run through airports and public spaces like hooligans. We absolutely were not to chew gum. We worked at being gracious hosts. We were not to be profligate or showy, but we were to be always well dressed and ready to perform as “little ambassadors.” My parents were pretty good models—honest, fair, welcoming of cultural differences; very flexible about trying new foods and unfamiliar modes of travel; and amused by the vagaries of schedule (“maybe tomorrow madam”) and climate (monsoons).

They patiently fielded a slew of questions about U.S. actions around the world, and the seeming contradictions of American beliefs at home in that historical moment. How could a country have such terrible race riots and visible class discrimination despite a Constitution professing liberty and equality?

We left India for good in 1963 and landed in New London, New Hampshire, just before my sophomore year of high school. I remember thinking everything was *big*: buildings, roads, cars, people. And everything worked—the post office, the bank, the phones, the coin-operated Coke machines. I was so excited to come “home” to America, but I was different, and as a teenager, it was painfully evident. I wore white loafers and thin cotton clothing that seemed foreign, and I did not know the first thing about skiing. I didn’t know quite what to say when a well-meaning geography teacher announced to the class that I must have meant *Indiana* when I said I had come from India. Luckily the high school was flexible enough to allow me to recalibrate—I was able to take advanced French with the juniors, not-so-
advanced math with the freshmen, and to my great delight, my first in-school course in American
history.

What I remember most about my introduction to American history was how long the teacher focused on
the colonial period. When we finally “moved west,” the school year was almost over. It reinforced my
notion of just how huge America was. I knew a lot more about World War I and World War II from
studying overseas, but was shy to share much about Europe and Asia when I first arrived in New
Hampshire.

My parents sensed how homesick I was for Delhi—partly because the climate was so cold that I could
never warm up, and partly because I didn’t like being the “new kid” in a small town. Knowing I loved to
dance, they went out to find just the right present that might help with the transition. They nailed it—a
tiny manual record player with a short stack of 45s, one by Chubby Checker. I must have played “Twist
Again” 3 million times, and I’m sure I danced up a sweat.

Living abroad made me a lifelong appreciative observer of American life, taking nothing for granted,
admiring the country’s bedrock principles and wrestling with its inconsistencies and ambiguities when
the American promise isn’t fulfilled. I remain a natural global nomad, still eager to learn about other
lands, but nothing touches me more than when I come back and go through Customs and the officer
says, “Welcome home.”
From a London Alley to the White House

LOUISA CATHERINE ADAMS, THE ONLY FIRST LADY BORN OUTSIDE THE U.S., HAD TO PROVE HERSELF TO HER HUSBAND’S FAMILY, CONGRESS—AND THE COUNTRY

BY LOUISA THOMAS

OCTOBER 31, 2014

It was hard for Louisa Catherine Adams, the only first lady born outside the United States, to say where she came from. She began her life in a narrow alley in London, in 1775, but she was taught not to think of herself as British. Her mother, Catherine, was English; her father, Joshua Johnson, was a merchant from Maryland and an American patriot. When she was 3, after the American Revolution broke out, and when it was hard for a man like Joshua to remain solvent and safe in London, the Johnsons moved to Nantes, and Louisa’s earliest memories were in French. When she was 8, the family returned to England. She was told that she was American, but she was raised as English girls of her class were raised: for parties, for prettiness, for a husband. She met the man who became her husband, John Quincy Adams, when he was a young diplomat visiting from Holland.

Her mother was happy with the match: If Joshua wanted their daughter to marry an American, how could Louisa do better than the son of the vice president of the United States? Her father, however, was less thrilled; he would have preferred a Southerner over a Yankee. John Quincy’s mother, Abigail Adams, was furious. When she guessed the engagement—he had avoided telling her—she wrote to him, “I would hope for the love I bear my country, that the siren, is at least half blood.”

As it happened, Louisa was already an American citizen. The proof is there—the plain fact of it, printed and indexed—in the annals of the Maryland State Senate: “An ACT to declare Joshua Johnson, merchant, his wife and children, citizens of this state.” Back then, what it meant to be an American was still being worked out: Louisa, for instance, was made a citizen of the state of Maryland, not the United States, at a time when the United States were, not was. There were vast dissimilarities in the union that seemed to matter—differences between the North and South, East and West. And there were differences between an American from London and an American from America. When Louisa married John Quincy, the United States was an idea, a place that existed only in stories and in her father’s claims to difference. It was no more real to her than the inside of St. James’ Palace or playing “duchess” in her dress-up games.

In the United States, a woman, in addition to making the home a “bosom” of comfort where her husband could take comfort from his rasping cares, represented the embodiment of political values in private life, the repository of republican virtue. While insulated from the corruptions of public life, the American woman was to represent and safeguard morality, and to instill that morality in children. She was supposed to educate sons and daughters—especially sons—to love their country, their father, and their God; to distrust state power; to exalt purity and self-sacrifice.

Louisa had learned these lessons, but incompletely. She learned to soothe cares by singing in the parlor, not by serving a well-cooked meal and well-scrubbed floor. She learned to decry the King of England, but accompanying John Quincy to Prussia after their marriage, she had delighted in dancing with the King of Prussia. She resented the call to self-sacrifice.
Louisa was 26 when she first stepped onto American soil. It was a dim, cold day—Thanksgiving—when she arrived at the Adams’ paternal mansion in Quincy. “Had I stepped into Noah’s Ark,” she wrote in her memoir *Adventures of a Nobody*, “I do not think I could have been more utterly astonished.”

The Adamses were as determined to see the differences as she was. To them, she was “a fine lady”—not a compliment. Louisa was given special foods at dinner, a separate plate piled with preserves. She was treated with solicitous attention, which “appeared so strongly to stamp me with unfitness.” She felt unfit herself. She had been trained to run a staff of servants. Abigail—whom Louisa saw as a kind of American archetype—bragged of waking at 5 to milk the cow.

Louisa was an Adams, but she rebelled against rooting herself in Quincy’s stony soil. As someone who came to know the United States from the outside looking in, Louisa was prone to reflect on what her American identity meant in ways that most native-born Americans rarely do. She could see what others could not always see: that even though men claimed to have completed a social revolution, a meritocracy of virtue, they were as other men were: ever sensitive to hierarchical distinctions. She was quick to see the demagogic susceptibility of democracies and the triumph of emotions and instincts over the republic of reason. She was skeptical of the American faith in the perfectibility of man. She distrusted “the inflating and vainglorious fancies which we are too apt to attach to human greatness.”

Louisa saw how ridiculous, and how tragic, were the heroes of the American pantheon: the “peering restlessness” of Thomas Jefferson; the wild, tyrannical tendencies of the quintessential democrat Andrew Jackson; the maneuvers of politicians who denied playing politics. And she saw how great the great could be, too. Of her father-in-law, John Adams, she once wrote, “Every thing in his mind was rich, racy, and true.”

She had to prove herself as an American, because others were quick to see her as something else. She and her husband had to bat down stories that the English Prince Regent had asked them to represent him at the christening of the English minister’s wife; James Monroe even asked John Quincy if the story was true. Western members of Congress referred to her “diplomatic tricks.”

“One of the greatest taxes I have to pay is that of concealing that I am a traveled lady,” she wrote drily to John Adams after grimacing through a particularly terrible music performance. During John Quincy’s (unacknowledged) campaign for the presidency and then for reelection, she tried to combat rumors about her nationality in an unprecedented way, writing a kind of campaign biography about herself. “Having never before appeared in print, and possessing no ability for authorship, [the writer] is indifferent to criticism, and careless of effect,” she wrote, “so long as she has the happiness to show that Mrs. Adams is the daughter of an American Republican Merchant.”

But she understood that being an American was not as simple as a matter of birth—even for those born in the United States. She saw, from afar (from Russia, in fact, where her husband was the U.S. minister plenipotentiary), how the War of 1812 united a disparate people once besieged, because she saw the effect it had on herself. “If I could correctly judge of the effect upon the feelings of our Nation of this transaction, by those which it has produced among the Americans we have here, I should look upon it as a blessing rather than a calamity,” she wrote to John Quincy. “Our Situation is perilous in the extreme,” she wrote to John Quincy, “but it is extreme distress alone which can ever discover to us the extent of our resources.”
But she also came to realize how fragile the bonds that held the country together were. She believed that factions and political parties would pull the country apart; she knew that the persistence of slavery would cause a violent rupture. She saw how tenaciously, how quickly, people held to their own local customs and mores, sometimes at great cost.

And this was hard for her, because she did not really have a local identity. She lived a life of trunks and packing cases; sometimes said she had no home. She wrote three memoir sketches, but she gave them titles without identification or antecedent: *Record of a Life. Narrative of a Journey. Adventures of a Nobody.*

She was an Adams, but unlike the Adamses, she had to construct her identity as an American. She would be independent. She would learn to take care of herself, to stand up for herself. She would claim rights. "In the marriage compact there are as in every other two parties, each of which have rights strictly defined by law and by the usages of society," she once wrote furiously to her husband, protesting how he made decisions for her life without her input. She would think about what it meant to be a woman, and what it meant to be a daughter, wife, and mother. She would learn to write well, and in writing to assert her selfhood.

She would accept that it was hard, and a never-finished process. In that, perhaps, she did embody a true American ideal. Thinking of women, she wrote, "Under all circumstances we must never desert ourselves."
Captain America Dons a Turban

ARMED WITH A BEARD, A SHIELD, AND A SENSE OF HUMOR, I LEARNED WHY THE U.S. NEEDS NEW SUPERHEROES

BY VISHAVJIT SINGH
JUNE 5, 2015

I was born in our nation’s capital in the early 1970s—but sometimes when people see me in my turban, they think of conflicts in faraway lands, terrorism here at home, Hollywood caricatures, and sensationalized news coverage.

Donning the costume of a superhero—complete with unitard and shield, in addition to the turban of my Sikh faith—changed all that. Suddenly, there was no question that I was American.

Like any good comic book, there’s an origin story. One that covers moving thousands of miles away from home after high school, trying to make my superpower invisibility, and fending off a constant barrage of hate speech.

Sikhs believe in the innate equality of all, striving to merge with energy that traverses every speck of the universe. Fighting against injustice and practicing the art of compassion are part of our spiritual practice.

As a physical manifestation of this journey, Sikhs must don long, unshorn hair as a natural extension of the human form. This was how I grew up experiencing my faith, though otherwise I had been brought up fairly secularly. (Our Sunday ritual was a trip to the butcher to buy fresh meat, rather than a temple visit.)

I first experienced hatred directed at me because of my religion in India, where I spent much of my childhood after my parents moved the family back to their country of origin in 1975. Following the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 by her two Sikh bodyguards, Sikhs were hunted down on the streets of many Indian cities.

We were fortunate to survive the fury of an angry mob that surrounded the apartment building where my family lived in New Delhi. But many Sikh men and boys would not be so lucky. Many were burned alive by having gasoline poured over them and lit on fire across the Indian capital and other cities.

When I graduated from high school, I moved back to the United States, hoping for a calmer transition to adulthood in Los Angeles. However, I began to encounter hatred of a different variety: offensive calls of “genie,” “clown,” and “raghead;” and laughter at my appearance.

In college, I felt overwhelmed at being stereotyped so much that, by sophomore year, I decided to take off my turban and clip my long hair, which had not been cut since I was born. After a short trip to the barber, all eyes were suddenly off me. I had magically transformed and did not stand out anymore.
I wouldn’t don a turban again for almost 10 years. First, I would fall in love with the words of Asimov, Plato, Nietzsche, Abbott, and Freud. I would explore meditation, Buddhism, and Taoism. Finally, I came back around to the Sikh faith through experiences with the religion’s music.

In August 2001, I put my Sikh turban back on. Only a month later, the horrific Sept. 11 attacks happened. As we watched the TV, shocked and horrified on that terrible day, I remember a coworker looking at me with bloodshot eyes, on the verge of tears, as if I was somehow responsible for these attacks. That was a prelude to a new normal in America that would look at my turbaned and bearded countenance as the ultimate “other” in our midst. The most common racist insult hurled my way ever since has been “Osama,” even after bin Laden was killed.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, after people who look like me were the victims of hate crimes by bigots across the United States, a piece by Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Mark Fiore would change the course of my life. Fiore’s animated cartoon entitled “Find the Terrorist” prompted users to click on the faces of people of all races and countries of origin as a way to point out our own witch-hunting tendencies and prejudices.

The cartoon so powerfully captured my identity and feelings that it inspired me to create my own cartoons featuring Sikh protagonists. In late 2002, my website Sikhtoons.com was born—and it has since provided a way to channel all my whims, frustrations, and inspirations, in cartoon form.

As my website gained attention, I began traveling across the U.S. to showcase my work and host cartoon workshops, mostly at Sikh gatherings and events. In 2011, in preparation for my first trip to the New York Comic Con, I drew a bearded Captain America wearing a turban, inspired by my experience on the streets of America and the release of the Captain America movie that summer. With a flash, reality and fiction collided to present this vision in my imagination.

A photojournalist named Fiona Aboud saw the drawing at the convention and suggested that I come back next year actually dressed as Captain America myself. I swiftly responded, “No.” I had never worn a costume, ever, and being teased my whole life for my skinny frame had further taught me to avoid drawing attention to myself.

Almost a year later, the massacre of six worshippers at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012 at the hands of a white supremacist prompted me to pen a few cartoons and an op-ed in the Seattle Times, making the case for a new American superhero who doesn’t take on Nazis, mad scientists, or communists, but rather takes down the real evil-doers in our society: those who commit hate crimes.

More than ever, we need a hero to fight intolerance and suspicion of people who are not like us, forces that are ripping our country apart. Fiona emailed me after reading the piece and made a second request for me to dress up as Captain America. This time I agreed to her request for a photo shoot on the streets of New York City.

The shoot took place on a sunny summer day in 2013. It was one of the most amazing days of my life. Hundreds of onlookers snapped pictures of me and with me; police officers posed with me in photos for
their kids; strangers hugged me; and I even got roped into participating in a wedding party (complete with a photo-op with the bride and groom).

An essay I wrote about the experience on Salon.com, which had six photos from Fiona’s shoot, went viral, gathering over 50,000 likes on Facebook. The images in the article keep finding a home to this day, on blogs and websites around the globe.

I have now traversed the country in my spandex uniform (later upgraded to the one featured in 2014’s *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*), from New York to Los Angeles, Kansas to Mississippi. My trips have taken me to universities, museums—even the backstreets of NYC with a late night comedy crew—to see corners of America I never thought I’d be invited to.

I have received messages of support from Americans in every walk of life: police officers, veterans, active service members, teachers, conservatives, liberals, men, women, black, white, Asian. The embrace of fellow Americans re-enforced my belief that we have much more in common than our eyes lead us to believe, that we all want to believe in a superhero that embodies the goodness of America, even if that superhero doesn’t resemble the clean-cut Chris Evans. And we can all have a good laugh about what I look like in a unitard.

Along the way, I have learned how much my own insecurity about my body keeps me from taking risks, and experiencing life’s many surprises.

I know comic superheroes are not real. In the American tradition, they have long been an extension of the imagination of many young immigrants. Young Jewish Americans of Eastern European descent, who survived the Depression era and battled forces of anti-Semitism, wound up creating one of the most iconic of superheroes—the Man of Steel, Superman.

Superheroes are always in our midst, in a sense. It turns out that just the uniform of a fictional character from the early 1940s, Captain America, created to fight with Axis powers in World War II, does possess a real superpower: It opens doors to new conversations and new visions of what our country can look like as its best self.