

1 Home Is Where the Border Is

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

4 BY FELIPE HINOJOSA
5 NOVEMBER 21, 2014

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

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

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

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

31 What do I mean? Well, let me tell you my story. I grew up with five sisters and one brother in a home
32 full of Bibles, the music of the Bee Gees, *arroz con pollo y frijoles*, and tortillas *de harina* (rice with
33 chicken and beans, and flour tortillas). I was born and raised in Brownsville, right on the southernmost
34 tip of Texas. Our house was about a 15-minute walk to *el puente*, the bridge you can walk or drive
35 across into the Mexican border town of Matamoros. When I was a teenager, my friends and I went to
36 Matamoros for dance clubs that sold you alcohol, no questions asked, and for the *taquerias* with those
37 fabulously addictive *taquitos norteños*—small tortillas filled with steak, onion, and cilantro, topped
38 with *queso cotija*.

39 If Friday nights were about football, then Saturday nights were about drinking and dancing to Green
40 Day, Kumbia Kings, and Maná. Don't ask me how we crossed back into the U.S., how it could be that
41 U.S. Customs officials asked a bunch of drunk teenagers: "Are you American citizens?" only to pass us
42 on through into the streets of Brownsville. *Era todo un desmadre*. (In English: It was pure chaos.)

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

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

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

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

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

76 The Lower Rio Grande Valley is by no means perfect. We have our share of problems, no question. But
77 one of the things that I love about the people of South Texas is our resolve to not take things lying down,
78 "*de no ser dejado[s]*" as the folklorist and Brownsville native Américo Paredes so eloquently put it. I

79 love our penchant for living in the moment, for laughing loud and hard at injustice, and for not being
80 afraid of crossing borders and inhabiting multiple spaces. As a Mexican-American and a Mennonite, I
81 feel equally at home in South Texas and in the American Midwest.

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

87 I think my barrio—the Lower Rio Grande Valley—can teach us a few things. Even as the region inspires
88 cultural exchange, it also demands that its inhabitants respect the struggles, pitfalls, and missteps that
89 come with being part of a vibrant and diverse community. The borderlands force us to reconsider the
90 meaning of community by reminding us that diverse communities thrive in the spaces between solidarity
91 and estrangement. But most importantly, the borderlands demonstrate how that quintessentially
92 American quality—optimism—comes not from naïveté, but from struggle, and from knowing our own
93 stories. Living in a diverse and complex world demands that we all be comfortable with who we are, and
94 thus better positioned to cross the economic, racial, religious, and gendered borders of our own lives.

95

96 **I Discovered America Through Japanese Eyes**

97 **WHAT HAPPENED WHEN A KID FROM CHICAGO BECAME AN L.A.**
98 **CORRESPONDENT FOR JAPAN’S LARGEST NEWSPAPER**

99 BY ARI RATNER
100 OCTOBER 28, 2014

101 “Scarlett, Scarlett!” I waved pleadingly. Across the red carpet she sauntered, her eyes invitingly meeting
102 mine. There I stood—a 24-year-old Jewish kid from Chicago decked out for the 77th Annual Academy
103 Awards with my overgrown eyebrows and a cheap rented tux—face-to-face with America’s luscious
104 girl-next-door, Scarlett Johansson.

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

108 Coming from someone who looked like me, the question must have seemed “lost in translation.” But I
109 was just doing my job. I was working for *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan’s largest newspaper. With more than
110 10 million daily readers, *Yomiuri* actually boasts the highest circulation of any daily in the world.

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

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

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

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

129 We drank Sapporo at Japanese beer gardens. We shared sushi, *donburi*, and ramen feasts. We sang
130 karaoke. (Mr. Morita taught me to sing a ballad to his native Osaka—in Japanese.)

131

132 Yet the border between Japanese and American—let alone Japanese-American—was far more fluid than
133 our pseudo-Tokyo nightlife might suggest. In fact, working in a community with roots in Asia helped
134 me better understand my own family’s experience of America. Our travel agent— an “Issei” (what
135 Japanese-Americans call an immigrant)—spoke longingly about the rice and fish in her native Japan in
136 the same way my mother—an Israeli-born “Issei” to America—spoke about the tomatoes and
137 cucumbers of her youth.

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

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

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

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

155 This global ebb and flow made L.A. fascinating to report from— and eat in. Community mixed with
156 community, cuisine with cuisine. Korean BBQ tacos. Thai gnocchi. Brisket sushi.
157 I saw this fusion develop—in some small way—in myself: At the office, I alternated picking up the
158 phone with a polite “*Moshi moshi,*” or a simple “Hello.” At Japanese restaurants, I got waiters’ attention
159 by shouting “*Sumimasen!*” Curry katsu reminded me of my grandmother’s chicken schnitzel—swapping
160 the potatoes for rice and adding a better sauce.

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

163 Working for *Yomiuri* from 2003 until 2006, I also had the chance to cover every state west of the
164 Mississippi except for North Dakota. Mr. Morita’s favorite state was New Mexico. We ate fried bread
165 outside Taos Pueblo—the oldest continually inhabited settlement in America, then drove in search of
166 ranches owned by Julia Roberts, Dennis Hopper—and Donald Rumsfeld. In Santa Fe, we visited
167 Georgia O’Keefe’s sunflowers and watched the sunrise over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. We drove
168 down the spine of I-25, following the Rio Grande past towns like Elephant Butte, Truth or
169 Consequences, and Las Cruces. We arrived in El Paso to report on a war story from Fort Bliss.

170 Later, I drove to the Trinity nuclear test site in the heart of New Mexico for the 60th anniversary of the
171 moment when, on July 16, 1945, man had “become death, the destroyer of worlds.” The sand was still
172 turned to glass.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

204 I wanted to continue finding myself, this time by working directly in diplomacy—hoping that I could
205 help prevent us from becoming lost in translation again.

206

207 **Learning the Twist in New Delhi**

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

210 BY LEE WOODMAN
211 DECEMBER 9, 2014

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

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

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

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

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

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

238 I attended a Catholic day school in Madras, then went to the American International School in Delhi
239 through ninth grade. While my older sister Betsy went to boarding school in the Himalayas, staying in
240 the bustling city had great appeal since I was an avid dancer—trained by my mom and a Broadway show
241 dancer, Richard, who took over her school in later years. I also studied *Bharatnatyam* (traditional Indian
242 dance) at the well-known Treveni Kala Sangam arts center in Delhi.

243

244 The American International School was housed in old Indian Army barracks and attracted not only
245 American kids whose families spent two-year diplomatic stints in India, but also a mix of Indian,
246 Canadian, Vietnamese, German, Swedish, British, and Dutch kids. From these classmates and my
247 teachers, new words not often used in the American lexicon took their place in my speech: “lorries” for
248 trucks, “frocks” for dresses, and “full-stops” for periods at the end of sentences. Instead of American
249 history, we studied Asian and world history. We could draw any mountain range on the Asian, African,
250 or European continents, but the Rockies or the Appalachians? Not so much.

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

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

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

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

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

283 advanced math with the freshmen, and to my great delight, my first in-school course in American
284 history.

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

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

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

300

301 **From a London Alley to the White House**

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

304 BY LOUISA THOMAS
305 OCTOBER 31, 2014

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

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

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

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

336 Louisa had learned these lessons, but incompletely. She learned to soothe cares by singing in the parlor,
337 not by serving a well-cooked meal and well-scrubbed floor. She learned to decry the King of England,
338 but accompanying John Quincy to Prussia after their marriage, she had delighted in dancing with the
339 King of Prussia. She resented the call to self-sacrifice.

340 Louisa was 26 when she first stepped onto American soil. It was a dim, cold day—Thanksgiving—when
341 she arrived at the Adams’ paternal mansion in Quincy. “Had I stepped into Noah’s Ark,” she wrote in
342 her memoir *Adventures of a Nobody*, “I do not think I could have been more utterly astonished.”

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

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

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

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

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

372 But she understood that being an American was not as simple as a matter of birth—even for those born
373 in the United States. She saw, from afar (from Russia, in fact, where her husband was the U.S. minister
374 plenipotentiary), how the War of 1812 united a disparate people once besieged, because she saw the
375 effect it had on herself. “If I could correctly judge of the effect upon the feelings of our Nation of this
376 transaction, by those which it has produced among the Americans we have here, I should look upon it as
377 a blessing rather than a calamity,” she wrote to John Quincy. “Our Situation is perilous in the extreme,”
378 she wrote to John Quincy, “but it is extreme distress alone which can ever discover to us the extent of
379 our resources.”

380 But she also came to realize how fragile the bonds that held the country together were. She believed that
381 factions and political parties would pull the country apart; she knew that the persistence of slavery
382 would cause a violent rupture. She saw how tenaciously, how quickly, people held to their own local
383 customs and mores, sometimes at great cost.

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

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

395 She would accept that it was hard, and a never-finished process. In that, perhaps, she did embody a true
396 American ideal. Thinking of women, she wrote, “Under all circumstances we must never desert
397 ourselves.”

398

399 Captain America Dons a Turban

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

402 BY VISHAVJIT SINGH
403 JUNE 5, 2015

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

428 In college, I felt overwhelmed at being stereotyped so much that, by sophomore year, I decided to take
429 off my turban and clip my long hair, which had not been cut since I was born. After a short trip to the
430 barber, all eyes were suddenly off me. I had magically transformed and did not stand out anymore.

431 I wouldn't don a turban again for almost 10 years. First, I would fall in love with the words of Asimov,
432 Plato, Nietzsche, Abbott, and Freud. I would explore meditation, Buddhism, and Taoism. Finally, I came
433 back around to the Sikh faith through experiences with the religion's music.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

465

466 The shoot took place on a sunny summer day in 2013. It was one of the most amazing days of my life.
467 Hundreds of onlookers snapped pictures of me and with me; police officers posed with me in photos for

468 their kids; strangers hugged me; and I even got roped into participating in a wedding party (complete
469 with a photo-op with the bride and groom).

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

473 I have now traversed the country in my spandex uniform (later upgraded to the one featured in
474 2014's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*), from New York to Los Angeles, Kansas to Mississippi.
475 My trips have taken me to universities, museums—even the backstreets of NYC with a late night
476 comedy crew—to see corners of America I never thought I'd be invited to.

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

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

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

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

493