

An abstract painting featuring a central figure in profile, facing right. The figure is rendered in dark blue and black tones, with a red and yellow patterned area on its chest. The background is a complex, textured composition of warm colors like red, orange, and yellow, interspersed with cooler blues and greys. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

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THIRD EDITION REVISED, EXPANDED, AND UPDATED A PORTRAIT

# IMMIGRANT AMERICA

ALEJANDRO PORTES AND RUBÉN G. RUMBAUT

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# 1

## Nine Stories

### 1

After spending eleven days in jail for antigovernment activities, Remedios Díaz Oliver and her husband, Fausto, left Cuba in 1961. A graduate of two Havana business schools, she went to work as a bookkeeper for Richford Industries, a container distributor. Fausto found work at Bertram Yacht, located nearby; that meant the couple could manage with a single old car. Within a year, Remedios had been moved to Richford's international division. Fausto took his two weeks' vacation, and the couple traveled to Central America with a bag of Richford's samples. They returned with \$300,000 in orders from pharmaceutical companies in Honduras and Costa Rica. By 1965, Remedios had been appointed Richford's vice president of domestic sales, in addition to serving as president of the Latin American division.

These were the years in which former militant exiles were looking for permanent employment. From her Havana days, Remedios knew many people with the skills to make a business succeed. In 1966, she persuaded Richford to advance \$30,000 in credit to one such person, with the promise that if he defaulted, she would cover the debt with her own salary. The man paid, the account grew, and so did her commission.

Following this experience and at her prodding, Richford agreed to advance credit to exiled clients.

In 1976, however, Richford was sold to a division of Alco Standard Corp. of Omaha, Nebraska. The new employer required Remedios to sign a contract guaranteeing that she would not compete with Alco Standard if she left the company. Instead of signing, Remedios decided to quit and form her own company. The construction trailer in which American International Container opened did not look like much, except that its owner had far more solid connections in the local market than the buttoned-down midwestern company did. By 1978, American International had taken over the inventory of Alco Standard after driving it out of Miami. Remedios became the exclusive Florida distributor for some of the biggest names in packaging, including Owens-Illinois and Standard Container. Her company had warehouses in Miami, Orlando, and Tampa and annual sales of over \$60 million.

Remedios has been president of Dade County's American Cancer Society, the Hispanic division of the Red Cross, and the social committee of the Big Five—the private club created in Miami in nostalgic remembrance of the Havana Yacht Club and its four extinct counterparts in Cuba.<sup>1</sup>

## 2

Karen Kim had not yet been born when her father's sister met and married a soldier in the U.S. Army who was stationed in South Korea. Soon after, in 1973, her pioneering aunt immigrated to the United States as a military bride, from where she would regularly send news to her family in Pusan comparing life in America with the authoritarian regime of Park Chung Hee. She also filed to obtain immigrant visas for her mother and brothers, and, in 1977, most of the family immigrated to Los Angeles. Karen's father, mother, and sister soon followed, but Karen, who was a baby at the time, was left in the care of a grandmother and would not rejoin her parents until 1979, when they had settled in and found work.

Mr. Kim, Karen's father, started out at the bottom, like many other immigrants. In Korea, where he had a high school education, he had worked as a bus mechanic; his first job in Los Angeles was at an auto body shop. Meanwhile, Karen's mother—who in Korea had worked in a toothpaste factory's assembly line—had been working as a seamstress in several sweatshops in L.A.'s garment district. Both her parents' employers were Korean. In 1986, Karen's parents took over ownership

of a small juice and snack shop located in the downtown garment district. Mr. Kim's older brother had bought the shop from another Korean immigrant in 1982. In 1989, Karen's aunt—the pioneer bride who had set all this in motion—became the owner of a bakery next door to Mr. Kim's shop. And in 1992, Mr. Kim's younger brother followed suit and bought a coffee shop nearby.

“For twenty years,” Karen said, “this has been my parents’ existence: six days a week, working from 5 A.M. to 5 P.M. in a little shop on the first floor of a building that houses several sweatshops, selling *jugos*, *tortas*, *café*, and *pan*.” When Karen and her sister had to help their parents at the shop, they found it a grueling experience, waking up at five in the morning and working twelve hours making coffee, squeezing juice, sweeping the floors. Most of their customers work in the sweatshops above their store, and their exchanges take place in three languages, Spanish, English, and Korean. Like her uncles and aunt, both her parents work together at the shop, employing only one or two other persons, usually Korean or Mexican immigrants. “They live in a mainly Mexican neighborhood, attend an all-Korean church, get their news from Korean newspapers and television programs, and work in an area where most of their customers are Spanish speaking, so their English proficiency is low.”

Like her aunt two decades earlier, Karen has been doing some pioneering of her own. In 1994, Karen was the first in her family to become a naturalized citizen, legalizing the American name she had adopted since fourth grade. She later became the first to graduate from college and recently the first to go to graduate school. A few weeks after she had entered a Ph.D. program, her proud father asked her over dinner, “Dr. Karen, what will you study?” And then, Karen said, “he told me that no matter what I ended up doing, I should tell our story, the story of my family’s journey to America.”

### 3

After finishing medical school, Amitar Ray confronted the prospect of working *ad honorem* in one of the few well-equipped hospitals in Mumbai or moving to a job in the countryside and to quick obsolescence in his career. He opted instead for preparing and taking the Educational Council for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) examination, administered at the local branch of the Indo-American Cultural Institute. He passed it on his second attempt. In 1972, there was a

shortage of doctors in the United States, and U.S. consulates were directed to facilitate the emigration of qualified physicians from abroad.

Amitar and his wife, also a doctor, had little difficulty obtaining permanent residents' visas under the third preference of the U.S. immigration law, reserved for professionals of exceptional ability. He went on to specialize in anesthesiology and completed his residence at a public hospital in Brooklyn. After four years, nostalgia and the hope that things had improved at home moved the Rays to go back to India with their young daughter, Rita. The trip strengthened their professional and family ties, but it also dispelled any doubts as to where their future was. Medical vacancies were rare and paid a fraction of what he had earned as a resident in Brooklyn. More important, there were few opportunities to grow professionally because he would have had to combine several part-time jobs to earn a livelihood, leaving little time for study.

At fifty-one, Amitar is now an associate professor of anesthesiology at a midwestern medical school; his wife has a local practice as an internist. Their combined income is in the six figures, affording them a very comfortable lifestyle. Their daughter is a senior at Bryn Mawr, and she plans to pursue a graduate degree in international relations. There are few Indian immigrants in the midsized city where the Rays live; thus, they have had to learn local ways in order to gain entry into American social circles. Their color is sometimes a barrier to close contact with white middle-class families, but they have cultivated many friends among the local faculty and medical community.

Ties to India persist and are strengthened through periodic trips and through the professional help the Rays are able to provide to colleagues back home. They have already sponsored the immigration of two bright young physicians from their native city. More important, they make sure that information on new medical developments is relayed to a few selected specialists back home. However, there is little chance that they will return, even after retirement. Work and new local ties play a role in this decision, but the decisive factor is a thoroughly Americanized daughter whose present life and future have very little to do with India. Rita does not plan to marry soon; she is interested in Latin American politics, and her current goal is a career in the foreign service.

#### 4

In Guadalajara, Juan Manuel Fernández worked as a mechanic in his uncle's repair shop, making the equivalent of \$150 per month. At

thirty-two and after ten years on the job, he decided it was time to go into business on his own. The family, his uncle included, was willing to help, but capital for the new venture was scarce. Luisa, Juan's wife, owned a small corner grocery; when money ran out at the end of the month, she often fed the family off the store's shelves. The store was enough to sustain her and her children but not to capitalize her husband's project. For a while, it looked as if Juan would remain a worker for life.

Today Juan owns his own auto repair shop, where he employs three other mechanics, two Mexicans and a Salvadoran. The shop is not in Guadalajara, however, but in Gary, Indiana. The entire family—Luisa, the two children, and a brother—have resettled there. Luisa does not work any longer because she does not speak English and because income from her husband's business is enough to support the family. The children attend school and already speak better English than their parents. They resist the idea of going back to Mexico.

Juan crossed the border on his own near El Paso in 1979. No one stopped him, and he was able to head north toward a few distant cousins and the prospect of a factory job. To his surprise, he found one easily and at the end of four months was getting double the minimum wage in steady employment. Almost every worker in the plant was Mexican, his foreman was Puerto Rican, and the language of work was uniformly Spanish. Three trips from Gary to Guadalajara during the next two years persuaded him that it made much better sense to move his business project north of the border. Guadalajara was teeming with repair shops of all sorts, and competition was fierce. "In Gary," he said, "many Mexicans would not get their cars fixed because they did not know how to bargain with an American mechanic." Sensing the opportunity, he cut remittances to Mexico and opened a local savings account instead.

During his last trip, the "migra" (border patrol) stopped him shortly after crossing; that experience required a costly second attempt two days later with a hired "coyote" (smuggler). The incident put a stop to the commuting. Juan started fixing cars out of a shed in front of his barrio home. Word got around that there was a reliable Spanish-speaking mechanic in the neighborhood. In a few months, he was able to rent an abandoned garage, buy some equipment, and eventually hire others. To stay in business, Juan has had to obtain a municipal permit and pay a fee. He pays his workers in cash, however, and neither deducts taxes from their wages nor contributes to Social Security for them. All transactions are informal and, for the most part, in cash.

Juan and Luisa feel a great deal of nostalgia for Mexico, and both firmly intend to return. “In this country, we’ve been able to move ahead economically, but it is not our own,” she says. “The gringos will always consider us inferior.” Their savings is not in the bank, as before the shop was rented, but in land in Guadalajara, a small house for his parents, and the goodwill toward many relatives, who receive periodic remittances. They figure that in ten years they will be able to return, although they worry about their children, who may be thoroughly Americanized by then. A more pressing problem is their lack of “papers” and the constant threat of deportation. Juan has devised ingenious ways to run the business despite his illegal status, but it is a constant problem. A good part of his recent earnings is in the hands of an immigration lawyer downtown, who has promised to obtain papers for a resident’s visa, so far without results.

## 5

Dr. Benigno Aguinaldo shut down his medical practice in Manila and moved to the United States. Now forty-one, he works as a nurse at a medical center in Los Angeles and makes \$50,000 a year—four times what his physician’s salary was in the Philippines. “I am not planning for myself anymore,” he said. “I am planning for my kids.” Back home, Benigno had noticed more and more newspaper advertisements seeking nurses in the United States, promising high salaries, sponsorship for visas, flights to Guam to take the U.S. nursing boards, and moving expenses. When he asked his father what he should choose—to be an R.N. in America or a doctor in his own country—his father told him, “Son, the opportunity is in America, not here.”

Benigno had a decent standard of living in the Philippines, and he and his wife employed a full-time housekeeper and a nanny for their three children. But as the economy worsened in the late 1990s, many patients switched to government hospitals offering free care, and the Aguinaldos started worrying about how they were going to put their kids through college. So he enrolled in a new fast-track program for physicians that allowed M.D.s to get nursing degrees by taking night and weekend classes for eighteen months. Benigno attended one with more than one hundred other doctors, among them his medical school mentor. So many doctors have taken up nursing in recent years—with the intention of switching careers and countries—that Philippine nursing students without M.D.s have complained that the

curve is being driven up on the national exam, which they must pass to graduate.

When Benigno arrived in California, he found that several doctors in his nursing class—an obstetrician, a pediatrician, an ophthalmologist, an anesthesiologist, and an orthopedic surgeon—had already been hired as nurses at the same medical center in Los Angeles. Once he passed the required U.S. nursing boards—which Philippine doctors tend to pass with flying colors—the hospital sponsored him for a work visa and signed him on. Soon afterward, he bought a three-bedroom house with a yard. His family arrived eight months later.

For Benigno, more difficult than the adjustment of moving to the United States has been the loss of professional status. “We feel a lot of shame,” he said, remembering his first day on the job, when he was ordered to wash the patients. “I never imagined myself changing someone’s diapers,” he said. “It is a real adjustment, draining the urine from the urine bags, scratching their backs. Lots of patients like to be scratched.” He does not want to be a nurse forever, and he is now often at Starbucks keeping himself awake with double espressos while he studies for the U.S. medical boards in the hope of eventually practicing medicine in his new country. In the meantime, he’s hopeful for his children’s futures. His fifteen-year-old daughter’s main problem, he says, is that her public high school here is too easy.

## 6

Rubén González ran away from the small town of La Esperanza after an incursion from an army patrol left several of his neighbors dead. Escaping the civil war in his native El Salvador, Rubén eventually crossed into Mexico and then traveled to the U.S. border. Although he came escaping persecution in his country, he was denied political asylum by U.S. authorities and had to recross the border as an illegal alien. From there he trekked to Los Angeles, where he survived through a series of temporary jobs in restaurants, landscaping companies, and construction. A small farmer in his native town, he had only an elementary school education and no urban job skills.

Eventually he found steady employment in a large gardening and landscaping company, where by dint of diligent and steady work he rose to supervisor. With his savings and despite his illegal status, he created his own small, informal gardening company, González Lawns, which, in turn, employs two young Salvadorans. The end of the civil

war in his country brought about major changes in Rubén's life. The new Salvadoran government pleaded with the United States to grant its expatriates legal residence so that they could stay and continue to send remittances home. Implausibly, Salvadoran government officials argued that their expatriates should be granted asylum because of a "well-founded fear of persecution in their country."

Rubén benefited from these events by first receiving a temporary residence permit and then being lucky enough to have his new asylum application granted. In a year's time, he became a legal permanent resident. He was now able to return to El Salvador and eventually brought his entire family to Los Angeles. With his legal status and increasing prosperity, Rubén has become a prominent figure in the local Salvadoran community. When the La Esperanza Development Committee was created by migrants from his hometown, he was elected president. This position has played a key role in helping Rubén fend off discrimination.

A stocky, dark man with heavy mestizo features, he suffers routine prejudice from Americans: clerks follow him around in stores, and the police have stopped and questioned him on several occasions. Despite these and other disadvantages, he plans to remain in Los Angeles and raise his children there. He explains:

I really live in El Salvador, not in L.A. Sure, the gringos discriminate against us, but when we have the regular fiestas to collect funds for La Esperanza, I am the leader and am treated with respect. When I go back home to inspect the works paid with our contributions, I am as important as the mayor. In L.A., I earn money and educate my children, but my thoughts are really back home. Besides, it's only three hours away.

Rubén takes his two children back to El Salvador every summer to meet with grandparents and so that they "do not forget the place where we came from." He plans to retire there.

## 7

Emmanuel Murat is a twenty-five-year-old black man of Haitian descent residing in Miami. He is a surgical technician at a local hospital, preparing and stocking operating rooms before surgeries. After high school, Emmanuel attended Barry University in Miami, earning a bachelor's degree in biology. Strongly encouraged by his parents to

pursue medicine, Emmanuel completed the pre-med track at Barry in the hope of attending medical school in the near future.

Emmanuel's family had come to the United States seeking a more comfortable life. His father had worked for the Haitian government in Port-au-Prince, amassing the money necessary to relocate to the United States in 1986. The family (Emmanuel, his father, mother, older brother, and grandmother) lived in New York for four years before moving to Miami in 1992, Emmanuel's first year of high school. They settled into a small single-family home in a West Indian neighborhood, where they still live.

Despite his humble background, Emmanuel did not have to look for a job until college, when he started working at a nearby Target store. After graduating from Barry, he found a full-time position at a pharmaceutical plant. Emmanuel, who lives with his parents, supports only himself for the time being. He hopes to support his parents in the near future. "We Haitians believe in family. We believe that when you grow up, if your parents need help, you should be able to take care of them." Emmanuel's family does not receive any government assistance or other outside help, in spite of its financial struggle. "We don't really give to charity, either. There is just no extra money in this house."

Emmanuel believes that Haitians face challenges to which other groups are not subjected: "When Haitians come from Haiti, we don't have the educational background that, for example, Cubans or Jamaicans have. I speak French at home; most Haitians speak Creole. We don't really get the chance to learn English." Despite these challenges, Emmanuel is convinced that his parents' stress on education, religion, and family values has provided him with all the advantages necessary for achieving success. Education, he explained, is the key to success, which he perceives as "having a fairly good career and being able to provide for yourself." Considering the future of Haitian Americans, he says, "I don't think political organization or anything like that is going to make any difference." Emmanuel urges his peers to ignore discrimination and acts of hostility. "That's all distraction. I would tell people to just stay in school and try to succeed on their own."

## 8

Martín Cuadra lives with his family (father, mother, little sister, and dog) in a small house that is part of a large real estate development

where all units look identical, as is common in lower middle-class areas of Miami. Martín was five years old when his family decided to emigrate. In Nicaragua, his father was a middle-class professional, and the family was stable. The father ran into trouble with the Sandinista regime and was forced to leave the country. In Miami, he started working at a bakery for \$3 an hour. Martín had to take care of his infant sister while his father worked, but “little by little things progressed until we were able to buy a house.” The father is now an accountant working at a bank, and his mom works as a cook in a hospital. His sister attends Miami-Dade Community College. The family have not yet become U.S. citizens, but they expect to do so soon.

Martín attended high school at Coral Park Senior High in Miami, graduating in 1996. Since then, he has been juggling work (at Toys “R” Us), school, and technical training in sound engineering to advance his career as a disc jockey. He works in clubs in Miami Beach and has done some parties in New York, Los Angeles, and Orlando. He’s active and well-known in the local music scene but is waiting for his big break, to be discovered by the “right people.” A creative, artistic career that places no limits to his potential is “plan A.” But he knows that the odds are against any one person succeeding in the entertainment industry, so sound engineering is “plan B.”

Martín says he’ll give himself until age thirty to work primarily on his dream career. “If I do get to thirty and still see myself in the bottom rung of the industry, then I go to plan B, which is already in process.” He is single with no children and lives at home with his parents. He contributes some money to the household to help with rent or food when he can, but it’s not something that is asked of him. Martín holds his parents in the highest esteem because “my family has taught me the value of unconditional love. A lot of parents don’t understand what unconditional love is, and I’ve been fortunate to have parents that do.” He sees himself as very close to success. “God put me in this place for a reason, and I’m kind of getting the idea of what that reason is.”

After the September 11 attacks, Martín Cuadra became more connected to his new country than ever before. “It just made me see what the United States means. It’s a place where your dreams can come true, and a lot of people in the world, I guess, are envious of that. Some people take advantage of the freedom in the United States, but with me, I value the opportunity to live in a free country and, yes, make money, but money is not more important than freedom.”

## 9

Justin Cheung, now twenty-four years old, came to the United States as a Taiwanese “parachute kid” when he was twelve. His parents, who owned homes in Taiwan and the United States, left Justin and his younger brother in the care of their fourteen-year-old brother in San Diego. Together, the brothers lived in a townhouse while attending junior high and high school. They were left to fend for themselves, with the help of frequent visits by their mother and generous financial assistance to pay bills, buy groceries, and meet any other educational expenses. Justin’s parents have professional careers. His mother has a college degree and worked as a teacher in Taiwan, while his father is a physician.

Justin and his brothers came to the United States with green cards (immigrant visas) when their uncle was able to successfully sponsor them. Once in the United States, the three brothers stayed in line because they were worried about getting into trouble and exposing their situation. Justin’s older brother eventually graduated from college and is currently in medical school in another state, while his younger brother recently graduated with a major in economics.

Justin is single, has never been in a serious relationship, and has been focused on school since coming to the United States. In high school, he earned straight As with perfect attendance because, he says, “I didn’t have my parents here. I couldn’t get in trouble too much.” He never had a job during high school and even spent his summers in school. Although he wanted to go to Stanford or an Ivy League school, he excelled at the University of California in cell biology and graduated with department honors at the age of twenty-two. He worked for one year as a research assistant to buy some time and get some experience while he waited to get into an Ivy League medical school on the East Coast. He was accepted and has just completed his first year there.

Justin maintains a hectic schedule, with six hours of daily class; two to three hours of daily study; volunteer work tutoring elementary school kids; involvement in various clubs; and some time for swimming, jogging, soccer, and basketball. He has no regrets about his past and feels as though nothing bad or unusual has ever happened to him. Moreover, he feels successful being in medical school, aims to have a good career, and is “trying to figure out what kind of a doctor I’m going to be.”