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Diario de Un Mojado

Ramn ?Tianguis? Perez
University of Houston (July 2003)
Unknown $12.95 (256pp)
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Diario de Un Mojado (Diary of a Wetback) is the first-person report of a Mexican national who spent several months in 1979 as an illegal alien in the United States. In a story richly larded with the specialized vocabulary of this group of adventurers, readers are introduced to the first “coyote” the author meets in the border town of Nuevo Laredo. This word, which refers to the intermediary who arranges illegal border crossings, is especially interesting because, in the Native American mythos, the coyote represents the “trickster” archetype.

Although this particular coyote’s business involves the whole bag of tricks, Perez only manages to complete the wet trip across the Rio Grande on the third try, having twice been caught and deported by the Migra (immigration officials). An exhausting odyssey through a series of safe-houses with wretched accommodations moves him slowly toward Houston, where he has been promised help by a friend. First he secures a fake Social Security card and learns to flash it so that a prospective employer doesn’t have a chance to read the warning on the reverse side.

Finally in Houston, Perez finds that job opportunities offer little actual realization of the grand expectations that lured him to cross the border pursuing wealth and leisure. “Spanglish” becomes more widespread the more deeply he penetrates into U.S. territory. In the Hispanic barrio of Houston, he sees ubiquitous Chicanos (Americans of Hispanic descent) in signature costumes, roaring around town in their cut-down old coches called “low-riders,” each with a boom-box blasting out both canciones familiares de Mexico in Spanish and “oldies but goodies” in English.

Though work is hard to find and miserably compensated, Perez skips around from Houston to Dallas, to San Antonio, west to Los Angeles and on to Oregon, having found jobs along the way, variously driving a pallet-loader in a print shop, working as a crew member in a big car-wash, spending a spell in carpentry, and picking fruit in Oregon and Washington State. Always remembering to cast a peeled eyeball over his left shoulder to see who might be following him, he meets some kind helpers, some pitiless exploiters, and even, with his raffish good humor, a few cute girls.

Perez has written two previous books about his adventures. Honest and picaresque, he tells it like it is, with a commendable balance in a story that never descends into either burlesque or mawkish sentimentality. Back in Mexico, Perez has settled down in Veracruz with his wife, Mary. He’s working legally as a freelance photographer.
SANDY MCKINNEY (January / February 2004)

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