The Heroes of Immigration
by Bianca Prentiss

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Americans tell the same story over and over again. We tell it in Alien when the mysterious organism attacks a cargo ship. We exalt it when Bruce Willis and his team of roughnecks blow up an asteroid headed toward Earth in Armageddon. We repeat it in Men in Black as the eponymous agents fight aliens who’re out to destroy our planet. Of course, they’re just stories, but stories, myths, affect how we see the world. Wendy Doniger, a professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, describes a myth as “a story that is believed, believed to be true, and [that] people continue to believe in the face of sometimes massive evidence that it is, in fact, a lie” (81). Each movie I’ve mentioned has to do with a dangerous alien threat and our preferred method of alien extermination by force. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, two Religious Studies scholars, noticed the pattern and defined it when they wrote: “The action of the American monomyth always begins with the threat arising against Eden’s calm” and “Eden becomes a wilderness in which only a superhero can redeem the captives” (174). The monomyth is so strong, it’s been told for the past four hundred years in America (Ibid.). Something from the outside threatens civilization, and a hero saves the day with heroic violence. Aliens attack the Earth, and a small band stands between them and humanity with guns cocked, ready to go. Vigilantes, people who enforce their own law without authority, borrow this narrative pattern and apply it to undocumented migrants, whom they see as a dangerous alien threat that must be removed by force, despite massive evidence that migrants are not dangerous at all.

Vigilantes like the Minutemen, an anti-immigration organization especially active in the first decade of the 21st century, wait for undocumented immigrants to approach the US-Mexican border in order to report them to Border Patrol, or even to apprehend the migrants themselves, taking the law into their own hands (Beirich). It’s the monomyth all over again: the vigilantes save America (civilization) from undocumented immigrants (alien threat). But because of our familiarity with the monomyth, we only need one side of the story: the vigilantes’. In the context of the monomyth, vigilantes are the heroes. Yet, with closer scrutiny, there is another story unfolding, one about immigrants’ heroic struggles. The Latino immigrant story tells of a journey through harsh terrain and encounters with harsher criminals, as well as with the American legal system, in a quest to reach a better life. If this story were told in any other context than the American border struggle, immigrants wouldn’t be villains; they would be heroes. However, Congress has yet to take action to provide an effective path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, essentially ignoring the problem. The American mon-
omyth has groomed us to believe that vigilantes are heroes for keeping villainous immigrants out of America; however, immigrants are the heroes of this story for their bravery and willingness to trek across the wilderness of nature and man in search of a better life. They should receive recognition in the popular media for their courage, and deserve an overhaul of immigration policy from the US government.

Of course, we should define what a hero is, or what we should consider heroic. Most people would agree that a burly, six-foot-tall firefighter saving a little girl from a house fire is heroic, but can we say the same for a mother who works two waitressing jobs to support her children after her husband has left her for the cleaning lady? Certainly, the mother is a hero as much as is the firefighter. Christopher Reeve, who played Superman in films in the 1980s, tells us that “A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.” For some, that obstacle may be a burning building, and for others it may be finding a way to pick up three kids from soccer practice after a husband has called for a divorce. It need not be dramatic. Sometimes heroes are normal people who face hardship and continue despite it. Suddenly, we have a yardstick to measure the actions of others. And indeed, this yardstick couldn’t be long enough to measure the height of heroism displayed by migrants on their way to the US.

For undocumented immigrants, the journey to America begins at home in Mexico or in Latin America. Imagine three walls with a dirt floor. There is no roof. There is no running water or electricity. There’s only a single, dirty well for water. It’s hot outside, and at night there are mosquitoes and cockroaches. Anyone can come in and take what little you have. It’s very different from homes we’re familiar with, complete with hot water heaters, air conditioning, and satellite television. This image confronts Frank George, a Minuteman vigilante who had reported undocumented immigrants crossing the border, when he went to Mexico to see the former home of the Gonzalezes, the undocumented immigrant family Frank lived with in Los Angeles in Morgan Spurlock’s reality show 30 Days (“Immigration”). Mexico is nothing like the United States. Few Americans know that the minimum wage of a general worker in northern Mexico is 67.29 pesos, which is only $5.18, per day (“Minimum”), a pitiful amount. Here, even a professional electrician only gets $7.37 per day (Ibid.). The chance of getting a US work visa is slim; only 5,000 of 140,000 work visas awarded each year go to unskilled workers (“How”). I did the math, and that’s only 3.7% of all work visas available to all countries, not just Mexico. Even if you have family in the States legally, the wait for a green card is still 18 years (“Five Facts”). Latino immigrants have had enough of poverty, and they don’t have 18 years to wait for relief. It’s easy to see why people journey hundreds of miles away from families, friends, and everything familiar to make a new start.

And so, undocumented immigrants decide to brave the journey to the United States, but there are many obstacles. Nature is against them. In southern Mexico, there is dense rainforest to trek through. The region is subtropical, so it rains frequently. If you can get through that, you contend with the desert in northern Mexico, which often claims lives. 704 undocumented immigrants died between 1996 and 2000 trying to cross the desert to get to the border (Zakin). However, there is a way to cut through Mexico without going on foot. Many immigrants jump on a freight train called La Bestia—The Beast—that runs from Guatemala through Mexico (Matalon). Lorne Matalon, a writer for independent news source Fronteras Desk, went to Veracruz, Mexico, to meet immigrants who regularly try to board the train. One immigrant said she’d seen three people die: “One was hit by a tree branch, one was hit by an electric cable, and one was thrown off the train by someone else” (Matalon). La Bestia is a double edged sword; it could be your ticket to freedom as much
as your death. The dangers are just as much human as natural.

Criminals are everywhere on the journey through Mexico. In Marc Silver and Gael Garcia Bernal’s four-part documentary Los Invisibles, they interviewed traveling immigrants on their way to the States about the dangers of making the trip. Most of their concerns were criminal-related. Kidnapping is a big fear because kidnappers will try to get a ransom for immigrants with relatives in the States; those without relatives are killed. Immigrants are in constant danger of robbery. Every person they encounter could be a potential friend, thief, kidnapper, or rapist. For women, the last category is a dreaded danger; an estimated six in ten women traveling from Central America and Mexico to the US will be raped. A psychologist in an immigrants’ shelter in Mexico says that a fourteen-year-old girl requested a contraceptive injection because she expected to be raped and didn’t want to conceive (Invisibles). Crime is so inevitable that it is no longer a matter of “if it happens” but “when it happens.” Yet, immigrants persevere despite the natural and criminal dangers. They are normal people facing overwhelming obstacles: they are heroic.

But the danger is not over when they cross the border. The Border Patrol is looking for them. Vigilantes like the Minutemen wait for them to cross and report them to Border Patrol (“Immigration”). Others, like Roger and Donald Barnett, detain trespassing immigrants without Border Patrol’s help (Zakin). If a migrant can remain undetected after crossing, he or she must search for work, and the work can be grueling or dangerous. Eric Zuelkhe, a writer for the Population Reference Bureau, says that immigrants take on risky jobs out of necessity; the job market isn’t open to people who don’t speak English, and some immigrants may consider taking a dangerous job because it offers safer working conditions than the same job in their home country. Day-to-day existence is better than it was in Mexico or Honduras or Chile, but it’s still a hard way to live. Migrants live with the constant fear that someone might find out they’re undocumented; if the Border Patrol finds out, it’s right back to poverty they go. In the meantime, they work and hope.

This story of struggle isn’t well-known, and that’s a problem. I have yet to see it in the mainstream media. Of course, people can’t complain that Latinos are under-represented in American mainstream culture: what would this world be like without Taco Bell? And isn’t the new Ultimate Marvel Spider-Man half-black, half-Latino (“Spider-Man”)? Yes, Miles Morales is of black-Latino descent, but he was born in the States (Ibid.). That’s a small win for racial representation, but it doesn’t tell the story of sacrifice to get to America. It’s not part of his narrative; immigration has nothing to do with him. What we need, and what immigrants need, are stories about migrants and their journey specifically. Their story has drama enough for a movie or a book, yet no one’s truly capitalized on it, and so we fail to realize the actual hardship of Latino immigrants. Without these stories, it’s unlikely we will do so, given our tendency to cling to stories we already know. That tendency even has a name; it’s called “the availability heuristic.” Psychologist Kendra Cherry describes it as “a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to mind” (“Availability”). If your only example of immigrants is that they don’t pay taxes and are social parasites, you’ll believe that of all immigrants you see. However, new stories are very powerful and can break a mind out of the rut of belief. The 1989 comic El Diablo is a good example of a new story that challenges its reader to think differently about a “familiar” topic: illegal immigrants and how they get here.

El Diablo (1990), written by Gerard Jones and drawn by Mike Parobeck, stars Rafael Sandoval, a masked vigilante in the fictional town of Dos Rios, Texas, which sits on the border between the US and Mexico. In the story arc “The River,” a smuggler abandons a van full of immigrants in
the Rio Grande when he’s spotted by Border Patrol. The migrants locked inside the van drown, and Rafael goes undercover as an immigrant to find the smuggler who killed them. On his journey, he meets young Israel, a hopeful migrant trying to find a smuggler to take him into America:

Rafael asks, “So Israel. Why do you want to cross?”

Israel answers, “To get a job. I can’t find anything down in Chiapas [a Mexican state].”

“And if you don’t find a job in America?” Rafael pushes.

“I will. Because America is like that!” the young immigrant replies enthusiastically. (El Diablo #13)

Rafael pushes, asking what he’ll do if he doesn’t find a job. Israel says, “People there are rich, and they help you. Your dreams become real in America” (El Diablo #13). This isn’t a young man looking to freeload off a rich country with good infrastructure and benefits. He believes America is where dreams become reality if you work hard enough.

Of course, Israel is not real. He’s the figment of a writer’s imagination. However, the hopes and dreams of the immigrants he represents are real, and that’s what makes him so human. In 30 Days, Morgan Spurlock’s TV reality series, young Armida, an undocumented teenager, goes to high school, competes in golf, and dreams of going to Princeton University. Armida’s parents want to have enough money to take care of their five children, and the whole family dreams of amnesty. In the documentary Los Invisibles, one man wants to reach America so he will have enough money to take care of his family and support his children. The interviewer asks his young daughter what she thinks America must look like, and she answers, “Beautiful” (Invisibles). In the same documentary, another woman left her children behind to find work in America and send money back to them (Invisibles). Immigrants want work, some money to send to their families, and opportunity. They are hungry for the chance to make something of themselves. Most of them want to make a better world for their children. They are the outsider looking in, while the vigilantes’ perception is the insider’s looking out—and they fear what they see.

Unless the perceptions of Latino immigrants changes, we will continue to treat immigrants as criminals and villains. It’s easier to vilify something you don’t know than to attempt to understand it. Vigilantes oppose immigrants because they don’t know them, and humans naturally fear what they do not know. Richard Puzzi, a ranch owner near the border, reported all his dogs had been killed by the migrants, his German shepherd hung and beaten; one morning he’d heard the clatter of migrants outside his house, and he walked out in a bathrobe with a shotgun, but he didn’t fire it (Zakin). In his mind, he had a reason for fear; people were trespassing on his property. Before her death last year, infamous nativist Barbara Coe said one less immigrant is “one less illegal alien bringing in communicable diseases, one less illegal alien smuggling deadly drugs, one less illegal alien gang member to rob, rape and murder innocent U.S. citizens” (qtd. in Beirich). The Southern Poverty Law Center says that, in reality, immigrants, undocumented and otherwise, “are incarcerated at a much lower rate than native-born Americans” (“10 Myths”). They’re even less dangerous than the typical American! Coe’s claims aren’t true, but rather a story she fully believes. Though her inflection may be malicious, they’re words of fear; she is afraid of Latinos, because the exemplar in her mind is a drug-smuggling, disease-carrying fugitive, despite all evidence to the contrary.

But stories that create fear have harsher consequences than mere false accusations spread by scared people. Fear breeds violence, which can hurt another person, though the fearful person may feel justified. According to USA Today, Richard Malley, a border vigilante in Arizona, aimed a gun at Deputy Sheriff Pat Arend, and Malley refused to lower his weapon because he believed the Deputy Sheriff was a drug smuggler. The en-
counter happened late at night while the militia border guard was patrolling a drug-smuggling corridor. Malley lowered his gun only after the deputy was able to provide identification (Hensley). Though Malley was on the lookout for smugglers, the vigilante could easily have killed a deputy in his suspicion and fear, and it would have been called an accident. Even Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a notoriously strong anti-immigration supporter, said, “Private citizens want to do something about the illegal immigration and drug trafficking, but they shouldn’t be taking the law into their own hands” (qtd. in Hensley). In another fear-fueled debacle, a nine-year-old girl and her father, both Latinos, were killed in a home invasion because three people in the Minuteman American Defense thought the father was a drug smuggler (Beirich). Other vigilante groups have harassed Latino day-workers; another group invades the privacy of homeowners by setting up surveillance around the houses of suspected undocumented immigrants (Beirich).

The American monomyth is a dangerous narrative, but a heavy-handed counter-myth won’t change the minds of the people who believe in it. In this respect, El Diablo is more than just a counter to the monomyth; the comic weaves the vigilantes’ point of view into the narrative with the immigrants’, giving a 360-degree view of the situation. The authors of El Diablo understood and acknowledged the viewpoint of the vigilantes without validating it or making it seem hokey. In El Diablo, the Border Patrol Chief also takes the law into his own hands on the word of a story. The Border Patrol Chief, Gagliardi, shoots at Rafael and his friend Israel after they’ve been stranded by the smuggler. Gagliardi opens fire on the two, and they fall into the river. Though Rafael survives, Israel drowns. In costume, Rafael breaks into the Chief’s house to confront him. Gagliardi reveals he’d been tipped off; rival smugglers were coming across the river. Gagliardi finally tries to take the law into his own hands and do something, and he inadvertently causes the death of an innocent man (El Diablo #13, 15). Gagliardi doesn’t know anything about Rafael and Israel. He doesn’t know who they were; he only has a tip. His perception of the situation was limited by his worldview, his myth. Such is the power of a myth: the story dictates thoughts that dictate behavior. However, in the comic the authors give both viewpoints, creating a fuller story than just one or the other sides’ point of view. They open the reader’s mind to a different way of thinking without lambasting already-held beliefs.

The voices of people, their stories, are the roots of myth, and myths are a powerful and effective tool that causes tangible change. Myths can tear people down, but myths can build people up, too. Already, the myth of the immigrant’s struggle may be taking hold and changing reality, despite the small amount of attention it has received. Dan Moffet, a professional journalist for About.com, writes about the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Bill, which would create a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants already in the US, as well as giving them Registered Provisional Immigrant Status, so they would be documented instead of deported. Though migrants would have to pay fines, fees, and taxes, they would be eligible for green cards in 10 years. Youths who entered the States as minors could apply for citizenship five years after they receive Registered Provisional Immigrant Status. The bill has stringent requirements: no felony charges, no late-comers after 2011, and English and civic lessons would be mandatory. Yet, immigrants would be allowed to work without fear. This is a proposed bill—it has yet to pass the House (Moffet). With more support from constituents, congresspersons would be more apt to vote yes, but first, opinions must change at the ground level within the populace; more people must come to understand that immigrants are far from the dangerous parasites mainstream media tells us they are.
We shouldn’t fear immigrants. In fact, they are heroes for battling odds we can’t imagine. They try to make money for their families, and most of them want a better life for their children. It’s not a popular view because it’s too human. We might empathize with them too much, and where there is empathy, there can be no fear. However, stories can also block empathy, as is the case with vigilantes. They fear the thing they do not know, and they don’t know the immigrants they meet. All they can see are people coming into their country, crossing their property, and endangering their lives. From birth, they’ve been rehearsing the same myth of civilization attacked by an outside force that can only be removed by violence. Their reasoning doesn’t make their actions right, but it does make the vigilantes understandable. They act on the story they know. But if people respond to a story with hate and violence, then it is time for a different story, one that builds up rather than tears down. We need more than stereotypes and token minority characters; we need real human voices telling their stories. Stories like that can literally change reality; already, the Senate has passed the bill that would allow undocumented immigrants a road, albeit a long road, to citizenship. Migrants could live in our country legitimately and without fear, as is their due. We need more stories like *El Diablo* to sustain the flame of change. We need to make their struggle a legend: historical, larger-than-life, heroic, and a thing of the past.

**Works Cited**


