

A Long Way Home

By Pat Willard and Maya Rock

Immigration has never been an easy topic in America — a nation built by and for immigrants.

The same cycle of unease and repression has greeted every wave—from colonial era indentured servants, to the southern European and Jewish settlers that began to arrive toward the end of the 19th century. Each group experienced long periods of struggle before being accepted as strong threads in the fabric of American life.

Today's immigrants don't have it much easier. Maybe it's even a little harder, given the global economy and the emphasis on professions that require education and technical training. As two of our professors recently noted, immigrants who come here with few skills walk a precarious path, one that is, at best, lonely and, at worst, distressing.

Alan Aja, an assistant professor of Puerto Rican and Latino studies, was born in the United States, the son of Cuban parents who were among the first to flee Fidel Castro's régime. He was initially raised in Miami. Then, when he was a teenager, his family moved to Louisville, Ky. Overnight, he went from a community where he was the norm to a community where he was perceived as a foreigner.

"How you see Latinos depends on where you live," he says today.

His personal experience as a Latino in the United States was underscored when he worked as a labor organizer along the Texas border and into Arizona. There, he saw up close the negative effects of the immigration enforcement policies and legislation.

None, though, have been as worrisome as Arizona's new law, SB 1070. Passed in 2010, the law makes it a crime to be in the state without proper documentation, proof of citizenship or green card. Even more disconcerting is the bill's stipulation that law enforcement officials can subject a person to questioning upon "reasonable suspicion" of not being

a U.S. citizen. The reasons for the creation and support of SB1070 are self-evident. While Latinos currently make up about 30 percent of Arizona's population, some demographers believe in the next 15 to 20 years they will outnumber the white population.



Alan Aja reports on the plight of Mexicans trying to live in America.

"Our immigration policy is often vague and complicated," he says. "Much of it has not changed since the 1986 Immigration and Reform Control Act, and the global economy is radically different now, accelerating the rate and pace of migration. About 75 percent of immigrants in this country are documented, so we're talking about 25 percent who are not here legally. Of those, about 40 percent are students, businesspeople and tourists who have overstayed their visas. Enforcement doesn't necessarily go after them."

Instead, enforcement pursues day laborers, agricultural and factory workers, primarily from Latin America and sometimes Asia. "Most of the people crossing the borders come authorized, but regardless of status, they are leaving behind their loved ones and

looking for jobs to feed their families. They're making a very dangerous, arduous journey simply to survive."

In the Southwest, Latino culture is part of everyone's daily life. For centuries, the region was ruled by Spain. After the area came under U.S. rule, the border with Mexico was porous for a long time, with people on both sides moving freely between the two countries. In hard economic times, however, immigrants almost always felt the brunt of government's attempt to protect those they saw as rightful citizens. The most egregious—and forgotten—example is the repatriation of Mexicans from the Southwest in the 1930s. Many had lived on their farms and owned their businesses for generations, but were sent back to Mexico—a country where they no longer had any family or economic



Tamara Mose Brown at a Brooklyn playground.

support—while their assets were redistributed to the states' white populations.

This time around, there is another long economic downturn, but there is also a violent drug war along the border. Still, Aja says, "There's a 'blame the immigrant' mentality rather than a real effort to understand and change foreign and domestic policies that perpetuate migration and other urban economic problems.

"Yes, there is a big drug problem and that has to be taken care of, but that involves a different set of supply and demand issues and policy responses. Yes, there are economic difficulties to address. Conflating issues and persecuting immigrants, who are trying to make a living, won't solve either of those problems."

PLAYGROUND PACTS

After Assistant Professor of Sociology Tamara Mose Brown gave birth to her first child in 2004, she began visiting the parks of gentrified Brooklyn. On the outings, which later included a new son, she took notice of the West Indian childcare workers congregating on the surrounding benches. As the child of West Indian immigrants, Brown has a special interest in the West Indian diaspora and recognized in the workers an important research opportunity. "I was interested in the idea that, at least with childcare, the public sphere was used for much of the day."

She first introduced herself to Hazel, a soft-spoken Grenadian woman. Through Hazel, she met 25 women whom she followed for three years.

The women, she discovered, were able to create community with each other through the use of these public play spaces. Although they came from different Caribbean islands, their sense of a panethnicity grew as they spent time with one another. Not only did the women have common work and culture, they also shared dreams and hopes for the future. Younger workers often planned to or were pursuing GEDs, or studying to become teachers or nurses. Many older women were saving for retirement back in their home countries. "There's an inherent isolation that is found, being in an employer's home," Mose Brown says, as many scholars have noted. To cope with this isolation, the women, in addition to socializing in the park, spend time together on the weekends, even traveling together.

The complexity surrounding childcare became apparent when Brown interviewed ten employers, most of whom were white, upper middle-class professionals. The employers grappled with anxieties involving childcare expenses and separation from their children — worries which often led to increased surveillance of the childcare providers. The childcare workers were upset about a Yahoo parent site that ranked workers by ethnicity, with West Indians coming in at the bottom. Since many were undocumented, the workers felt they couldn't do much about either situation.

The results of Brown's research, *Raising Brooklyn* (New York University Press), were published in January 2011. Meanwhile, she has moved on to two new research topics: comparing aging Jamaican immigrants in New York with their counterparts in Kingston, Jamaica, and the "social capital of children's playdates" in New York.