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## Harvest of Empire: The Untold Story of Latinos in America

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## *Harvest of Empire: The Untold Story of Latinos in America*

DIRECTORS PETER GETZELS AND EDUARDO LÓPEZ. INDEPENDENT PICTURES. 2012. (BASED ON THE BOOK BY JUAN GONZÁLEZ). 90 MIN.



"We are all Americans of the New World, and our most dangerous enemies are not each other, but the great wall of ignorance between us." - Juan González

For some Americans, the term "illegal immigrant" is the beginning of a narrative in which malicious or opportunistic foreigners infect America, virus-like, exploiting loopholes in government bureaucracies to live an easy life on the backs of hardworking American taxpayers. According to this narrative, there are only two possible outcomes to this unwelcome cross-cultural contact: expulsion of the foreign bodies or the destruction of America (or at least a conservatively nostalgic idea of America). Inevitably, the bogeyman invoked by the term "illegal immigrant" is Latino (typically reduced to "Mexican" as a pejorative). The documentary *Harvest of Empire*, based on the book of similar name by Juan González (2001, recent new edition 2011), accomplishes several important tasks in response to this dominant narrative: It offers contexts that situate the immigrant as a historical subject prior to his or her seemingly sudden appearance inside U.S. borders, and it suggests a different possible outcome to that narrative, one in which the defining principles of the nation are confirmed, not destroyed. As a well-informed polemic fighting against the current tide of anti-immigrant rhetoric, *Harvest of Empire* is a timely and generally effective antidote to the dangerous xenophobia that is the true virus threatening the integrity of essential American ideals. As such, the film would have great value in a high school or college classroom as a corrective to the willfully ignorant

construction of the "illegal immigrant." As one of the film's interview subjects, Mexican-American journalist, María Hinojosa, puts it: "There is no such thing as an illegal human being." Once one moves past the dehumanizing language that allows one a safe distance from the realities of immigration, one is compelled to face the complicated and contradictory relationship of the United States with its Latin neighbors. *Harvest of Empire* is an ideal vehicle by which that "illegal immigrant" is recognized as a fellow human being (including portraits of real-life immigrant Latino pioneers). If it sometimes slips into a didactic "preaching-to-the-choir" mode and makes obvious emotional appeals (especially in the persistently ominous music that accompanies much of the film's stock footage of civil wars and political unrest), such minor flaws are far outweighed by the value of its highly topical message.

The scope of González's book, which covers 500 years of European and Latin American contact, is necessarily telescoped by the film into a summation of key events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that have led to the current state of American demographics, which has seen an explosive rise in the number of Latinos living in the U.S. This fact underpins the film's discursive history lesson; it offers a historical travelogue of Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and El Salvador, explaining how in each nation's case, political machinations, frequently orchestrated by the United States made remaining in one's homeland an increasingly dangerous and untenable proposition for scores of citizens. The viewer learns of CIA-mandated assassinations of progressive political leaders, killings that align American political intrigue with big business, as in the case of the United Fruit Company's desire to remove Guatemala's President Árbenz Guzmán in 1954. In detailing how this assassination led to thirty-six years of civil war in Guatemala that claimed the lives of as many as a quarter million Guatemalans, the filmmakers not only flesh out a back story for the proverbial "illegal immigrant," but compel the viewer to admit to his or her own tacit complicity in a system that routinely and

blithely manipulates the political destiny of other countries, as if playing a board game on a Sunday afternoon.



*Harvest of Empire* unveils a moving human story that is largely unknown to the great majority of citizens in the U.S.

Directors Getzels and López balance the film's history lessons with personal reflections from prominent Latino-Americans. One of the most eloquent of their subjects is Dominican-American author Junot Diaz, whose immigrant experience has strongly influenced his work. Diaz articulates the ethos of the film when he says, "If every immigrant child in this country was allowed to tell the real emotional truth of their experience here, people in the United States would discover that we actually make immigration a more horrific experience than it needs to be." Diaz exemplifies the liminal subjectivity of the immigrant; in his statement, he speaks both as the immigrant child and as an American. For Diaz, the dialectic of the immigrant and the "we" that he sees himself a part of is a conceptually necessary turn for the immigrant American. His call to have the voice of the immigrant child heard consequently demands that the native-born American recognize the inherent liminality of the American experience. *Harvest of Empire* tells us that America is defined by immigration; to selectively choose "good" and "bad" immigrants is to in fact deny the defining essence of the country, to rewrite its history in order to shape a future that looks nothing like the multicultural society that *is* America today.

As the film reminds us, Anglo-Americans are rapidly becoming an ethnic minority in this country, a fact that of course strongly informs the hysteria on the far right about immigration. This speaks to the fundamental flaw in the

arguments against Latin American immigration made almost daily in the media (which are sampled throughout the documentary), which, at essence, represent a racist affirmation that "true" American values are those of a white, capitalist, Christian hegemony. *Harvest of Empire* offers a combination of historical overview and personal testimony to stitch together an effective rebuttal, creating an opportunity to educate and inspire viewers about a shared human desire for personal freedom and dignity. As Hinojosa says in the film, anyone anywhere in the world "may be born with the American spirit." It's a spirit that recognizes no national borders and is driven by the limitless power of the human heart and imagination. It is this defining spirit of hope and opportunity that *Harvest of Empire* offers as the best argument for Latin American immigration because it is the best argument for America.



The living history depicted in *Harvest of Empire* is a moving, inspiring and often heartbreaking tale.

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