

January 13, 2004

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Where Roma Soap Meets Dove

By ROSSANA FUENTES-BERAIN

MEXICO CITY — A supermarket is a curious window into a country's history. I remember shopping in my neighborhood grocery years ago. Then, in the early 1980's, before Mexico City was gentrified, the district of Colonia Condesa was a destination for college students like myself. Rents were cheap, even if buildings were old and run down.

As President Bush and other leaders gather in Mexico at the Summit of the Americas to discuss the future of our slice of the globe, I feel compelled to look back. In pre-Nafta times, doing your daily shopping on the corner of Amsterdam and Michoacan was no different from doing it in your parents' suburban market. When I was growing up, Mexico had one party: the PRI; one church: the Roman Catholic; and one brand available for every product: a Mexican one. The soap was Roma, the soup was La Moderna, and for the sweet tooth there were Carlos V chocolates and La Palma jellies.

In the decades after World War II, Mexico operated on a mode of self-sufficiency, even if it meant living with less than acceptable goods. Trade barriers kept out foreign products — and most cultural influences, for that matter. That world started to change rapidly in the last decade of the 20th century. One of the most visible transformations came in Mexico's relationship with the United States. Geography had tied us together but history made us drift apart after the 1847 war, in which our border was forcibly redefined. The popular saying, "Poor Mexico: so close to the U.S. and so far away from God," was part and parcel of our dealings with the "gringos" until 1992, when Mexico's baby boomers made a bold move and signed Nafta.

Today, you can see the results on the shelves of my local grocery. Mexican brands now compete side by side with products like Gatorade, Hershey bars and Dove soap. Colonia Condesa has changed as well. It and other urban neighborhoods have become magnets for affluent people working in service industries, many of them tied to international companies.

Along with economic changes have come cultural ones. By the mid-90's, it was O.K. to admit that you spoke English. Bookstores, coffee shops and movie theaters reflect a cornucopia of international influences. Amsterdam Avenue, an odd elliptical street at the heart of Condesa, is now described as one of the trendiest spots in town (at least according to last September's Vanity Fair).

Nafta's first decade has not only changed Mexican supermarkets, it has transformed American ones. "Made in Mexico" labels have popped up on products on the shelves of states as unlikely as Iowa, as our exports to the United States more than tripled. The free flow of capital and goods in North America has rightfully established itself, yet we are still lacking one important part of the equation: the free flow of workers. President Bush's new efforts on immigration reform are a first step. I've also done my share of shopping in Los Angeles and New York and I know that for many of the Mexicans working there,

those reforms could bring much relief.

But while my own small world may well have improved, 10 years after Nafta took effect, the overall gains made in Mexico certainly feel incomplete. Employment rates and salaries are internationally competitive just for a small percentage of the urban population. Half of Mexicans live in shameful poverty. One third of the population, still reliant on agriculture, is in danger of losing its way of life, partly because of the trade agreement. Development funds are badly needed to help those Mexicans benefit from Nafta.

So I walk home with my grocery bags through a city where the daily struggle can be seen at every corner. I think about the billions of dollars America is spending on rebuilding Iraq. And I can't help but wonder why in the past decade Mexico and the United States have worked so much on becoming good trading partners and so little on becoming good neighbors.

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