

Real test awaits 'invisible'immigrants

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Body

When Douglas Turner Ward wrote the play A Day of Absence in 1965, he wrote it as an act of high satire. Black folks in whiteface lamented the absence of black folk in a small southern town. Because the "***real***" black folks were gone, the extent to which the small, fictional, white community had come to depend on invisible blacks was satirized and highlighted in the play.

Imagine my glee, then, when Latino activists held up signs that said, "We are not invisible," at rallies that brought hundreds of thousands to the streets in cities across the country. Imagine my delight at the audacity that those who thronged to the streets, many here illegally, showed when they stepped up for their cause.

Of course, Congress made it easy. Suggesting that as many as 12 million people who are illegally here should be declared felons is incendiary, especially when those people cut our grass, clean our homes, pick our crops, and maintain our offices. What would happen if those 12 million people disappeared?

Very possibly, their absence would hit us where it hurts, just like the absence of black folks did in Ward's play. We'd find longer lines in restaurants where immigrants do the cooking, larger piles of dishes in the homes where immigrants do the cleaning, more debris on the construction sites where immigrants do the hauling. Maybe we will find out exactly what the economic impact of the immigrant presence is on our society if immigrants heed the call to absent themselves from work, school and shopping on Monday.

The Latino population spends more than \$2 billion a day. If Latinos disappear Monday, will it make a point about their economic presence? Or will it generate a backlash to immigration reform? The Montgomery Bus Boycott was met with legal challenges, but the people prevailed. Are Latinos prepared to meet similar legal or economic challenges if they come up?

The recent rallies made the point that immigrants will no longer be treated as invisible. They put Congress and citizens on alert that they are mobilized and motivated. Will this be the case in the face of a storm?

Latinos might reflect on the African-American experience. Black labor was invisible, essential and disrespected. Even the implicit threat in Ward's Day of Absence did not substantially change that condition. Absenting themselves from markets Monday might trigger a wake-up call or a backlash, depending on the strength of this movement.

Julianne Malveaux co-edited The Paradox of Loyalty: An African American Response to the War on Terrorism.

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