

*Latino Sun, Rising*



## *Introduction*

**A**t the center of my work I have located a certain awareness that I call the Public Consciousness, which is the knowledge and general information shared by people familiar with daily life, particularly in the United States. Almost everything that registers on the five senses of Americans also influences and engages the interests of citizens from other countries. For this reason, public consciousness issues tend to attract almost automatic attention both at home and abroad. And the best way to measure and to weigh the nature of the information that engages the general public, I believe, is to examine the media in order to consider the thinking as well as the actions of Americans. For it is by studying the goals, dreams, and aspirations we spend our lives and energies securing that a society is judged, whether we find these vague criteria fair or not. Our collective and individual reactions to American life reveal the ideas, viewpoints, and intangibles that matter to us: what engages our interests, and the degrees to which we understand and the extent to which we shape and determine the particulars of American civilization.

Certain traditional issues have always captured the attention of students of the United States. When we consider the nature of the lives of Mexican Americans and other U.S. Latinos, however, we soon learn that the majority of Americans are hardly conscious of the fact that Spanish-speaking citizens are an important component of American life. Generally speaking, commentators cursorily mention Hispanics, followed by disturbing silences that do not reveal how Spanish-speaking Americans actually fit within a United States that increasingly is featuring a multiethnic citizenry. Although Latinos comprised 12.5 percent of the U.S. population in 2000, the social inertia that usually counters change has made it difficult for many citizens to realize the nature of the changes that could considerably improve life for all Americans. Changing traditions and practices is enormously difficult, and sometimes, outright resistance stymies the momentum needed to provide traction for new ideas and new ways of looking at our changing population. A new self assessment is what the United States now requires.

The Latino population is regarded as being so varied that no one Latino group understandably feels comfortable representing or speaking for other Spanish-speaking Americans. Still, the unifying experiences shared by Americans who speak Spanish provide such common ground that I do not think it is presumptuous to say that most good-willed Latinos often feel like *primos*, like cousins, when they encounter one another. Whether we are thus from Mexico or from Guatemala, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Venezuela, or any other Latin American country, the Spanish language and our different *hispanidades* often provide a glue that connects us both from within and without. We Latinos proudly point out that we are as diverse as our cultural roots indicate. Although American society often groups all Latinos together, we are very conscious of the cultural and geopolitical differences that distinguish us. Our foods, music, art forms, celebrations, and the histories of the Latin American countries where some of us were born, for example, are usually quite different. But in the United States many of the national and regional distinctions that separate Latinos in Latin America increasingly are seen as less significant, especially when Spanish remains the common link. Indeed, I have seen the faces of people light up, as if the sun has suddenly emerged from behind a dark cloud, when they hear someone near them speaking or addressing them in Spanish, their first and sometimes only language.

The viewpoints I feature in the following pages have been developing within me for years in a variety of ways. Readers should know, at the outset, that I have always hoped to offer positive reports about the nature of Latino life in the United States. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, I very reluctantly determined that, although Mexican Americans and Hispanics have made great strides over a number of generations, Latinos are still not as prominent in the public consciousness of the United States as our population numbers tell us we should be. Feeling elbowed out sometimes was not what Latinos expected, but I have always believed that it is necessary to know where people stand in order to understand a country's needs. For if a situation, or state of affairs, is not being adequately addressed, perhaps we need different leaders. Disturbing as this realization may be, feeling left out has not disillusioned millions of Latinos, including myself, from continuing to work to create the best lives that we Spanish-speaking residents have been able to muster for our families, as these essays attest.

The progress of Mexican Americans and other U.S. Latinos requires a quality education that opens up the kinds of opportunities that usher in noticeable differences. In this effort, imaginative works of literature, includ-

ing essays, letters, memoirs, and other writings aimed at disseminating knowledge about the cultural multiplicity of U.S. Hispanics should be particularly timely. During the last thirty years, books about the growing-up experiences of the authors have been a staple of the publishing establishment because young people have needed to see how successful models have negotiated social and cultural obstacles. I have searched for nonfiction works that address how mature Latinos address social issues, and I have found a noticeable dearth. Aside from the unrepresentative work of writers such as Richard Rodriguez and Linda Chavez, who have cast themselves as unique and exceptional, finding published materials that speak to and for average, middle-class, mature Latinos has been difficult.

I therefore begin with the autobiographical “*Sol Naciente: Youth*” section to familiarize readers with some of the shaping coordinates of my own background. The other two parts of this volume, however, endeavor to offer something considerably different in the field of ethnic writing. Although a few of the subjects addressed in these pages are already a part of the traditional discourse of the Latino community, my purpose is to invite a larger American public into a conversation. My goal, indeed, is to prompt constructive discussions about some difficult issues often avoided. Since earlier generations of Latinos were excluded from publishing their views in widely circulated venues, few of our antecedents left behind much of their history, insight, and cultural wisdom. That is why most Latinos today have very few viable means of understanding how current trends and patterns were shaped by past practices, making it hard to measure the extent of the progress Latinos think we see in the twenty-first century.

Politicians, advertising people, and survey-takers are beginning to demonstrate an appreciation for the changes that the more than 38.4 million U.S. Spanish-speakers are contributing to American culture and the economy. Latinos cannot help society more substantially if not provided with the necessary opportunities that allow us better positions as U.S. citizens. The fact that most Americans are not prepared by their education to see and to expect Latinos in mainstream society, or do not meet middle-class, better-educated Hispanics who wield decision-making and policy-setting positions across the country, has not helped. For these reasons, creating and promoting a wider understanding of resident U.S. Latinos is one of the main goals of these essays.

When *Crowding Out Latinos* (2000) appeared, I had spent a good number of years thinking about how we Latinos might cast and represent ourselves in the twenty-first century. The first essential step, it seemed to me,

was to demonstrate how Latinos have worked to become regular, tax-paying, ordinary Americans. As a sequel to that book, *Latino Sun, Rising* seeks to describe, more self-consciously, how my wife and I have attempted to create our own Latino family in the United States, given the confluences and flux we experience by pursuing our Latino and American family interests. When I was a teenager I realized that some darker-skinned Latinos are not seen as the regular, everyday Americans they were taught to become by the schools in South Texas. It was then that I consciously decided to construct myself as the Mexican American that I endeavor to describe in the following pages. For, in one way or another, every person chooses how to represent himself or herself in order to develop relationships with other people.

Such a decision may not sound significant to other Americans, but how we Latinos cast ourselves, both individually and as a minority majority population group, is a serious matter. The issue usually is whether to represent ourselves simply as Americans, as most of us are, or to specify that we prefer to be known as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, or Americans with roots in another Latin American country. Often what unfortunately occurs is that we represent ourselves in keeping with the way that people judge the color of our skin. If Latinos pass for white, for example, society tends to encourage such citizens to blend. If not, Latinos are taken as foreigners, regardless of whether they are U.S. residents, and without regard to how well they may speak English. When people ask me, for instance, I usually say that I am an American. Such a response usually leads people to ask where in the United States I was born, for clearly I do not look like the archetypal American. Not until I reveal that I am an American of Mexican extraction, that I was born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, are people satisfied. I have been extensively schooled in American literature, that is, in the literatures of the Northeast, the West, the Civil War South, and the cool, tree-filled, wetter Northwest; but, I only know something about the U.S. Latino contribution to literature because I have made it my business to discover that on my own. Americans know that there are large numbers of Latinos, particularly in the Southwest and in many other pockets of the United States. Yet most will also acknowledge that, despite the modern marvels of today's media, they have not encountered much information about Americans who speak only Spanish, or English and Spanish, on every ordinary day. This is the sad state of affairs that I am hopeful this book will partially remedy.

During my life, achieving a comfortable, personal adjustment to my own self as a U.S. Latino has not been an easy matter. In retrospect, I can now

say that has been the case because our American public consciousness has traditionally lacked Mexican American and Latino success models who invite emulation. This near-zero absence of emulous figures has meant that, like most Mexican Americans, I have had to construct and fashion myself from what my parents taught me and from the great variety of images and reading materials available within American culture. Everything that I have learned from my experiences, in other words, has contributed to the Mexican American and Latino person that I have constructed. The result, ironically, is that I have often felt like the new archetypal American that J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur famously sought to describe in *What Is an American* (1782), a connection that surely may surprise some Americans:

He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours [*sic*] and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. (*Letters from an American Farmer*, Letter III)

That “strange mixture of blood” that de Crèvecoeur points out, to be sure, refers to the intermarriages that occurred between Europeans and the indigenous people of the Americas. This type of new American, as we now well know, does not completely leave “behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners,” for these characteristics, changed by life and education, often continue to be passed on to our progeny. Then, too, not all immigrants are invitingly “received in the broad lap” of America. Many Americans, including the great majority of Latinos, have remained less “melted into a new race of men” and women, despite the fact that the potential for “great changes in the world” are possible.

Before proceeding, I need to state that I do not mean to single out my own life, education, and progress as representative or unique. Like other Latinos and Mexican Americans who have struggled to secure the Ameri-

can Dream for themselves and their families, my hope is that describing my experiences in the land of my birth will be useful to other Latinos who are unsure about how they might represent themselves. The first requisite I recommend is to work on one's esteem, which is not a natural-enough process for Latinos in the United States. On this issue, there is an enormous amount of historical documentation that shows that American society has not usually embraced or made Latinos feel welcomed, often in our own land. Psychologically, history has made many Latinos more conflicted and uncertain than other Americans, whether they consider themselves Mexican Americans or Latinos with cultural roots elsewhere. They are, to be sure, Americans of Latino descent, and some feel more Mexican or Latino while others feel that they are now more American. My point is that as U.S. Latinos many have had a more difficult time maintaining and then continuing to develop an interest and pride in our own ancestral cultures, yet that is exactly the nature of the challenge that most Spanish-speaking Americans face as we move into the twenty-first century.

Like most people, I read the newspapers, and see and hear the afternoon and evening news reports. During the day I work at a university, where I teach and where I try to address contentious ideas sensibly, because I believe that sensitive, political, and downright troublesome issues ought to be discussed and not ignored. Living as an American Latino has been difficult for me, as for others, because invariably people who hear me speaking in Spanish tend to assume that I was born outside of the United States. Some Latinos were, but the great majority of us are U.S. Latinos. In the former case, I argue that we Americans need to be generous and hospitable to immigrants who have made it and who are surviving economically in this country. When America's camera eye—the same literary one that John Dos Passos invented—showcases Latino progress, successful Hispanics can be found virtually anywhere, carrying out all kinds of admirable roles. Although fortunately successful, I am also painfully aware that many of my Hispanic peers did not share my happy upbringing and subsequent good luck. The media uses examples of successful Latinos to suggest that Hispanics are making excellent progress. But such images obscure the fact that the great majority of Spanish-speaking citizens in the United States are living today on poverty-level wages, barely surviving on incomes that offer them little hope of ever reaching the great American middle class. Owning a house, two cars, and being able to rest on the weekends, with time and resources to visit friends and relatives during the holidays, is a luxury that many Latinos do not enjoy. Look at the nearest group of Latinos around; we do not have to look

far to see the unattractive realities that surround most Hispanics in America today.

Depicting ourselves in positive ways within a culture that has traditionally misrepresented Latinos presents a difficult challenge. Successful Latinos have to be careful about casting themselves as exceptional, that is, as noticeably different in some discernible way from other less successful Latinos. In keeping with the American cult of exceptionalism, Latinos are learning the necessity of being unusual or different in some way in order to be successful. This means that some Latinos find it difficult to feel comfortable within American society, in part because U.S. culture does not easily embrace average Latinos, leaving many feeling left behind for sometimes feeling not American enough.

In making these opening observations, I have not been motivated by Hispanics who are exceptional and successful, by Latinos considered different and unique. Indeed, most of the books published about Hispanics are about out-of-the-ordinary Latinos, about Hispanics who have triumphed in one way or another. Rather, I have had in mind primarily members of Spanish-speaking families who do not yet feel themselves part of the general public consciousness, despite the fact that many of their ancestors have resided in the United States for a number of generations. Temperamentally I am inclined to address issues on which Latinos have not yet developed a comfortable consensus, matters that require the type of considerations I hope to communicate to readers. I believe that current and future opportunities require considerable careful attention, for the possible pitfalls are many. Dismissing past inequities is difficult, since the past everywhere explains the present. That is why most Latinos find it hard to ignore negative messages, events, and signals sent and received in all sorts of personal and public policy ways. Acting indifferently to such semiotics or avoiding or denying the cultural disregard that Hispanics have historically endured in the United States remains a challenge for all Americans. And, although Latinos understandably prefer to celebrate the advances of Hispanics, the reality is that to champion only or mainly the Latino successes is to distort the actual living realities of most Spanish-speaking Americans.

The American Dream of owning and living in decent housing, holding a well-paying job, securing a good education, and providing for the young is definitely the goal of Latinos. Compared to the lives of our parents, there is no doubt that a good number of us enjoy improved livelihoods. Yet when we consider the proportionally small number of Latinos who have learned to provide for their families versus the more than 35 million Hispanics who

daily struggle to survive, good-will Americans may wince. More than a third of a century after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed the outright discriminations that Spanish-speaking citizens used to suffer along with African Americans, too many Mexican Americans and other Latinos are still waiting for equal treatment within American society.

Documenting how one Chicano grew up, how to best render the life of a Mexican American family, and how to think about some public issues in print has been an energizing experience for me. My motivating idea was to show that we Latinos have been ready to join the American family for some time—even while most of us are increasingly finding it difficult to maintain our traditions, mores, and values in order to pass them on to our sons and daughters. Most Latinos I know believe that we can be good American and Spanish-speaking citizens at the same time. We do not see the kind of conflict that some people do with our bilingualism, with functioning both in English and in Spanish, with eating hamburgers for lunch *y arroz y frijoles*, rice and beans, for supper. Many of us, of course, wish that we could communicate better in both languages, an issue reflecting the education that has been available to us. We do not believe, furthermore, that we have to stop being Mexican Americans or Latinos in order to be good patriotic Americans, as some people, including some Hispanics, appear to think. To underscore that desirable goal, we can point to our pervasive respect for education, our desire to succeed, and to our enduring, customs and ways of thinking. These characteristics have been demonstrated and they are increasingly appreciated. We now want our views to be accorded the type of attention that the larger American society will increasingly have to pay as we become regular, normal, everyday Americans.

Since our nation's past history of racial relations requires attitudinal changes that people appear to believe will somehow naturally emerge, actually making American society hospitable to Spanish-speaking citizens is not an easy challenge. Nonetheless, that is the sought goal. Although there are Latinos and other Americans who feel that the needed changes will occur by themselves, projected demographic increases among U.S. Hispanics tell us that maintaining the high quality of life all Americans desire will require some active, real work.

To encourage all U.S. citizens to see U.S. Latinos more positively, as more educated and as rising professionals, these essays are offered to suggest how the contours of almost any Mexican American's life can be shaped by parental realities and enlightened public policies. My idea here has been to highlight some matters of importance to Latinos and to demonstrate how

change is simultaneously occurring and being resisted, even as we Latinos communally and individually work to define and to express our views. My main hope is to persuade readers that working to understand Hispanics at this point can only help all Americans. How else are we to move forward collectively as the great nation that we seek to enhance?

