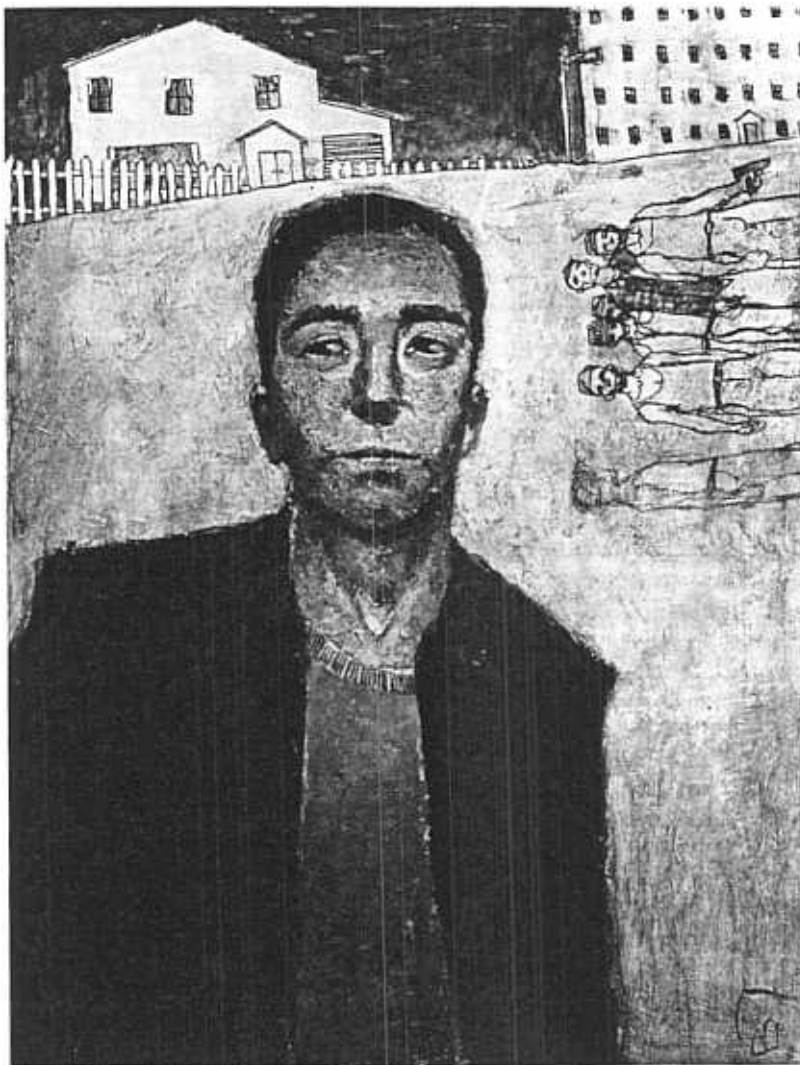


Soapbox



Familiar Strangers

RAY SUÁREZ

Why are we Latinos still unknown?

We were among the first Americans. Why are we still strangers? The people you call Latinos, Hispanics, Spanish, wetbacks, and illegals drew their first breaths when an infant was yanked, wet and screaming, from his mother's womb nine months after Christopher Columbus and his

hungry men alighted from their ships and walked ashore on the out-islands of the hemisphere.

Five hundred years later, we bus your tables, watch your kids after school, pick your strawberries, lay your sod, entertain you at Disney World, and frighten you on darkened

streets. Weak of mind and strong of back, we populate your dreams of fabulous sex and immigrant invasion. We fill your jails and fight your wars. We live here for years and never learn your language, so you've got to pass "official" English and English-only laws. We veer between reckless bravado and donkeylike deference. Our men can't hold their liquor, but they can carry a tune. They beat their wives and anyone who dares insult them. Their wives turn to lard after a couple of babies, and remain sweetly compliant as they take care of yours.

You know us so well, it seems. Why are we still strangers? That endless wrestling match between black and white—a struggle over everything, real and symbolic—needed fresh blood. They enter from stage South. So you leave a Miami drugstore angry and resentful when a counter girl doesn't understand a perfectly simple question. Elderly home owners who can't afford to move complain about noise and cooking smells, and Catholic churches become stages for the social drama playing itself out on the streets.

Writers like Linda Chavez say Hispanic Americans follow the same generational trajectory as Italians, Irish, and Poles. Others, particularly in civil rights organizations like the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the National Council of La Raza, say something different is happening. Having the Old Country two hours away by jet, instead of across an ocean, means these new Americans don't have to slam the door on their place of origin as other immigrants have.

In the popular mind, the arrival of Spanish-speaking immigrants is closely associated with neighborhood decay. Reality is more subtle: Neighborhoods sag in some places, spruce up in others. Despite wildly different outcomes, a kind of reductionism is at work—a tendency to regard "arrivals" of Dominicans in Upper Manhattan, Mexicans in Chicago, Central Americans in Los Angeles as an undifferentiated metaevent.

They move too many people into too-small houses. Their gang's emblems

will start showing up in spray paint on garages. There'll be trouble at the local school. You won't be able to talk to your neighbors. (They may smile amiably, but they won't understand a word you say.) It's all true. It's all false.

A new generation of nativist critics wring their hands over millions of unassimilated residents forming a fifth column and bringing Quebec to our door. They want old-style "total immersion"—that is, throwing immigrants in at the deep end of the American pool. Their opponents, I'll call them ethnicists, want it both ways.

Ethnicists argue for continuing foreign-language government services, yet when Latino acquisition of English is criticized as too slow, they insist that these immigrants are learning English as quickly as other Americans did. That's *Nuestra Raza*, able to learn English quickly and not learning English, at the same time.

Latinos are settling in urban enclaves, yes, but it remains an open question whether they are bound to the ghetto the same way black families of similar income have been.

In their level of education, earnings, and consumption patterns, they resemble their gentrifying neighbors more than their Hispanic working-class *hermanos*.

"I'm an urbanite?" says Jerry, a 33-year-old "Mex-o-Rican" (his own term: his father is Mexican, his mother Puerto Rican) who owns a home in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood. A high-income skilled tradesman whose wife also works outside the home, Jerry acknowledges that he had his pick of places to live. "But I feel it's important for the majority of low-income Hispanic kids in Logan Square to have someone as an example—to show that people like them can live comfortably, own a nice home. It's important for kids to see me going to work in a shirt and tie rather than heading to a construction site with a lunch bucket." Jerry is a rough Hispanic equivalent of the "race man" black intellectuals talked about in the 1950s and 1960s. He speaks Spanish at home, watches Spanish television, though not exclusively, and is learning

to play the *quatro*, a small 16-string guitar as central to Puerto Rican traditional music as the banjo is to bluegrass. Yet Jerry admits that he has more in common with his white neighbors of European origin than with his Hispanic neighbors.

Patricia, born and raised in Ecuador, is in her 40s and until recently was executive director of a citywide agency serving Hispanics. She and her husband bought a three-flat in 1986 and used its rapid appreciation to buy other investment properties. Patricia has left Logan Square for a new home in Wilmette. "I'm representative of a group of friends who moved here as young marrieds, childless couples. At

Middle-class Hispanics are inevitably class straddlers, economically tethered to whites while maintaining strong emotional bonds to Hispanics.

the time it seemed we would stabilize the neighborhood. But then our concerns about education and safety started to take over when we had kids, and this close-knit group of people who lived nearby is slowly eroding, and I didn't feel like I had any reason to stay around here anyway."

Gustavo, also in his 40s, is a senior department manager in Chicago city government. By law, he must reside in Chicago. He concludes that there is "no way" he would be living in Logan Square in five or ten years. It would be more likely, he says, to find him living in Colombia, where he grew up. "This is not a neighborhood I consider appropriate for my daughter, Veronica." Yet Gustavo finds much to like about Logan Square. He believes the neighborhood has become a magnet for upper-income Latinos, which has contributed to his sense of comfort: "No one wants to feel isolated living in a neighborhood."

Middle-class Hispanics are inevitably class straddlers, especially when they are home owners. They perceive their property value to be tied to the future of "Anglo" investment in the area. They are thus economically tethered to whites, while they maintain strong emotional bonds to Hispanics. When the interests of one group conflict with those of another, must the straddlers make a choice?

With a strong desire to teach their children Spanish, to live in an area where Spanish is still an important language of commerce, to live near family and in the city, these Logan Square neighbors demonstrate an attitude toward assimilation far different from the one that opened the century.

At the other end of the social and economic continuum, yet living nearby, are Latinos—boys in particular—who are convinced that America will never provide for them.

The world of American Latinos, brought to you courtesy of your local late news, is populated by hard, tragic gang members who believe in little except their need to enforce their code on their block. They live among shuttered factories and empty warehouses. School becomes irrelevant before they reach their teens.

America is going to have to see—and reach—these young men. America's zest for "juvenile predator laws" threatens gangs like the Spanish Cobras, but new recruits seem ready to take up the spots emptied by death, imprisonment, or drift into low-wage work. These boys know their country does not know them, even if they spray their names in 10-foot letters on train stations. "We're all just niggaz out here." One nervously touches his gun for reassurance, scanning the faces in the passing car, waiting.

Still strangers, they are products of the lead-poisoned soil of the American city. We ignore them at our peril.

Ray Suárez is a Washington-based senior correspondent on The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. From The Old Neighborhood by Ray Suárez. Copyright 1999 by Ray Suárez. Reprinted by permission of The Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.