They Are a People Living on the Bridge Between Two Worlds: Latinos: Two Worlds
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They Are a People Living on the Bridge Between Two Worlds

By Frank del Olmo

Now that The Times is concluding its three-week series of articles on Latinos in Southern California, about as detailed and thorough a look at that community as any newspaper has ever attempted, there can't be too many questions about Latinos left unanswered for either Latino or non-Latino readers—except one.

Why bother?

It may seem unusual in a city founded by Mexicans, in a state where thousands of place names are Spanish and where 4.5 million people—20% of the population—are of Latin-American extraction, but the question does get asked. And not just by Anglo newcomers. Many longtime residents, even a few with Spanish surnames, wonder why Latinos should be seen any differently than the dozens of other ethnic groups that preceded them into the proverbial American melting pot.

What sets Latinos apart from the other ethnic groups that have contributed to the United States, each in their own unique way and often despite discriminatory treatment, is the fact that for Latinos the language and culture of their Latin-American homeland has not faded away with the passage of time. And it will not fade away in the foreseeable future. The homeland is so close that migration to the United States continues virtually unabated to the present day.

Because of this unique situation, Latinos face a choice that no other ethnic group in this nation has had to deal with. How much of their home language and culture should they give up to blend into the Anglo-American mainstream? Or should they give up any at all?

By now it is well known that a Latino can be born, live a long life and die in parts of this country—East Los Angeles for example, or South Texas—and never speak a word of English or have any significant intercourse with non-Latinos. It is doubtful that this ever really happens, of course, but that doesn't make it any less possible.

To one degree or another, this cultural and linguistic duality is at the root of many of the problems Latinos face in this society—the lack of economic opportunities, limited political representation, the high dropout rates among Latino students in school and colleges.

But as troublesome as it might be in social terms, the Latino's cultural duality is also logical. It is an outgrowth of the fact that the U.S.-Mexican borderlands are the meeting ground of two great cultures—the Anglo-American tradition of the United States and Canada to the north, and the Ibero-Indian tradition of Latin America to the south. And any people who have lived in such a region as long as Latinos have will serve as a bridge between two cultures and languages, wittingly or unwittingly.

Once this historic reality is accepted, some of the more controversial goals Latino activists are striving for can be better understood.

Almost everyone wants to reduce the high dropout rates among Latino students, for example. And few people would object to efforts aimed at getting more Latinos to become citizens and vote. But when Latinos push bilingual education or bilingual ballots as answers to these problems, they are also asking for something more profound—acceptance of the fact that the Spanish language is a common means of communication in this country.

Few people would seriously argue that farm workers don't deserve better pay and working conditions for harvesting this nation's agricultural bounty. And any humane person wants the exploitation of

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undocumented aliens in our urban industries to be prevented. But when Latinos suggest that these migrant workers could defend themselves more readily if they belonged to unions, and if those who are not citizens had their immigration status legalized, they are also asking for an acceptance of the fact that Latino labor has been important to this country in the past, and still is.

I will concede that both of the previous paragraphs oversimplify some extremely complicated issues, but the key word in them is "acceptance." That summarizes what Latinos want of this society—acceptance not only as individuals, but of their cultural heritage. And by heritage I do not mean just food and music, but language and the cultural perspectives that come with it.

In the meantime, it will be difficult for Latinos to be fully accepted in any field of endeavor without limiting to a certain extent their role as Latino spokesmen. Politics is the one area where that is not necessarily all bad. For it is in the give-and-take of public life, and in debating public-policy issues, that Latinos will most clearly define their differences from other Americans, yet still find areas of agreement where compromise can be hammered out.

The diversity of the local Latino community was an important underlying theme in The Times series. But it would have been surprising if that community were not diverse, including as it does 3 million people living from Santa Barbara to San Diego, of different social classes, and with varied attitudes toward politics, the arts, religion, morality and even relations between the sexes.

Yet while conceding that this diversity makes generalizations difficult, I have concluded my work on this series convinced that there are notions and issues that unify most Latinos, even across class and political lines.

One is that cliche-burdened, but still viable concept Latinos call *el Sueno Americano*. As the headline on one article in The Times series proclaimed, the American Dream is still very much alive in the *barrios*. And Latinos define that dream of success the same way most other Americans do—a productive career or job with decent pay, a nice home in a pleasant neighborhood, an enjoyable family life and a secure future for their children.

Latinos also want to retain whatever Spanish they know, and pass it along to their children. But they are also fully aware that English is the key to success in this country, and so they want to speak both languages.

Finally, we all revere our Latin-American heritage. And we look forward to a time when it gets the respect and understanding—the acceptance—it has always deserved from a nation whose rich past it helped build, and whose future it can make even richer.

Frank del Olmo is a Times editorial writer.