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**‘Too Bad You’re Latin’**

This essay also appears in the Race

A well-intentioned producer once said to me, “John, you’re so talented, but too bad you’re Latin — otherwise you’d be so much further along.” When I pitched a movie about Latinos, another producer said: “Latin? People don’t want to see Latin people.” This is not just my experience but a typical Latino person’s experience in America.

Donald J. Trump has done one good thing. He has galvanized a conflicted and diverse community. For years, activists and politicians have struggled to get Latinos to vote and show their power. But not until Mr. Trump’s racist rhetoric shone a light on anti-Latino sentiment did we feel the need to make our voices heard on the issues that matter to us: from proper funding for our schools, better infrastructure in our communities and financial aid, to health care that doesn’t consider poverty a pre-existing condition.

There are around 56 million of us. We are the largest ethnic minority in the United States, at almost 18 percent of the country’s population. And yet Latino students drop out of high school at a higher rate than members of any other minority. We are victims of neglect, discrimination and ignorance. We have grown up amid an entrenched disrespect for Latin culture, and we have often internalized that disrespect.

Bernardo de Gálvez led a group of fighters against Britain in support of the American colonists during the Revolutionary War. Galveston, Texas is named after him. Credit Wilfred Santiago

The dominant narrative is that we have just “illegally” crossed the border or are “fresh off the boat.” In fact the Spanish are evidence of America’s first original sin: We were mistreating indigenous people here long before the British brought slaves to the colonies. People forget that Latinos founded some of America’s first cities.

Latinos have been dying for America since before we were a nation. Why have our children not heard that thousands of Latino patriots fought for America in the Revolutionary War? Bernardo de Gálvez, a Spanish general, recruited Mexicans, Cubans, Native Americans and free African-Americans to fight against the British in the South, while Cuban women donated their jewelry and money to help the patriots. Where is the Ken Burns documentary about that?

Why don’t they know about the many Latinos in the War of 1812? Or anything of the 20,000 Latinos who fought valiantly in the Civil War? Or of those who earned Purple Hearts or the Croix de Guerre in World War I? Or of the up to 500,000 who served in the military in World War II?

Ellen Ochoa is the first female astronaut of Hispanic descent — part of the 1993 space shuttle Discovery team. She is currently the Director of the Johnson Space Center. Credit Wilfred Santiago

It’s as if our heroism and sacrifice somehow counted less, as if we didn’t exist in history at all. Without a past to glorify and uplift you, how do you propel yourself into an unknown, tenuous future?

I’m only an amateur historian. But I am an expert on my own life and career. So to bring it around to more contemporary slights: Hispanics are the most underrepresented ethnic group in film and television. “Saturday Night Live” has only just hired its first Latina comic. Are we really to believe there are so few funny Latinos? We are similarly marginalized in business and corporate life.

This exclusion sends a painful message to every Latino child about how he is seen and judged. Latino people face a double challenge: to create our own positive self-image while battling against the way the broader society portrays us. Without textbooks in schools that do justice to our contributions to the making of America, and without media representation expanding to include more Latin faces and voices, we are vulnerable to a demagogue like Mr. Trump claiming that we are all “drug dealers,” “rapists” and “criminals.”

But a range of studies find no link between violent crime and immigration. The fact is that immigrants as a group commit far fewer crimes than the rest of the American population. Almost every immigrant is just here to make a better life for himself.

That can be hard to do when the states where many immigrants live — Texas and Arizona in particular — gerrymander Latino communities out of political power and limit funding to their neighborhoods. Latinos aren’t uniformly liberal; some are conservative because of their religious beliefs or fiscal views. And yet if all of the eligible Latinos voted, a number of states would turn from red to blue.

We need a Latino Spring in this country. We need to demand power and equal opportunity. A friend of mine recently did a small experiment to tease out anti-Latin sentiment. She sent out two résumés for an acting job with her picture attached. She happens to be very dark skinned (“morena,” as we say in Spanish). On one résumé she used her own traditionally Latina-sounding name, while on the other she used a traditionally white-sounding name. The Latina name received zero callbacks while the white name received a few responses.

Where else is this racial profiling going on while we are “living while Latin”? It is going on while we are working for the promotion that doesn’t come, while we are trying to rent an Airbnb for vacation but no one will respond, while we are hoping to make our children’s lives better than our own.

Latinos need to demand our place in American history, and in corporate, political and social fields. We must demand an equal share of the American dream, and not accept a downgraded version of it. We need to stop accepting exclusion over persecution. In this critical election, and in the future, I urge you all to register and vote, to be counted and heard.

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