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Latinos can offer wisdom of experience

By ELBERT GARCIA

In years past, I would have thought of writing a *Spectator* column as posing a Faustian dilemma; submitting anything to the nation's second oldest college newspaper would clearly be like signing a deal with the devil. However, sitting in the presence of Maria Hinojosa, BC '84, Latino Heritage Month's keynote speaker, and a renown author and journalist, I saw something that made my true responsibilities clearer. In her eyes, I saw the dreams and realities of those known and unknown; among some of them: an excited woman who returns home to her family after her first day at English school, an Army recruit playing dominoes on the corner one last time, and a former schoolyard bully becoming a neighborhood cop who sometimes walks too close to his beat. I saw in her eyes the reflection of a room full of Latinos of

different origins who expressed the pain and frustration that went along with attending an institution that is frequently referred to as “the belly of the beast.” More importantly, I saw the hope of an expecting mother, who, like many others, was afraid of the world that her child would enter, but also optimistic at the chances that her offspring would have of growing up in a society that she could help change. What crystallized my resolve to start writing that night was that I saw all this in one educated woman’s eyes, but not in the pages of the University’s only campus-wide forum for expression.

For lack of money, my double remains television-less; the old 1960s black and white Mustang TV that I inherited from my parents upon my inauguration into Carman two years ago is on the fritz, again. However, it seems that despite my stepping out into the world beyond my dorm, the picture that I receive from the media remains two dimensional and colorless. None of this is more evident than in the coverage that resulted from the O.J. verdict; while all the talk concentrated on the eight black jurists and the three white jurists, no one seemed to care about the one Latino juror. In fact, most people whom I asked informally didn’t even know that there was a juror of Spanish-speaking descent. I got answers like, “Oh weren’t there nine black jurors” and “nah, there was four white people, weren’t there?”

This is just an example of how Latinos are marginalized and split into two camps either by skin color or by their political ideology. Popular misconception tells us that Puerto

Ricans are liberal Democrats, Cubans are conservative Republicans, and Mexicans, depending on the generation and if they call themselves Chicanos or not, can go either way. Of course, everyone else, from Dominicans to Guatemalans to Argentinians don't count because they're either nonvoters, illegal aliens, or too assimilated into "white America" to bother to differentiate. Whichever way you look at it, the message often is that our unique multinational perspective is redundant and unimportant.

This skewed sense of reporting helps portray the image of Latinos as a small minority of the population. However, nothing could be further from the truth; Latinos are the fastest growing segment of the population. The last census reported that between 1980 and 1990, the Latino population grew from 6.9 to nine percent of the population. By the year 2010, the Census expects that there will be an estimated 30.8 million Latinos, up from 22.6 million in 1995. Even at Columbia, despite this year's drop, 9.3 percent of the 84.2 percent of the Columbia College population that reported their ethnicity are of Latin American descent, a percentage that translates into 300 enrolled students in Columbia College alone. Places like Portland, Oregon, Sioux City, Iowa, Lawrence, Massachusetts, Brentwood, L.I., and even Woodbridge Hall, can now boast of having Latinos. The numbers support the idea of what we could term, to borrow a phrase from Richard Nixon, a "silent majority."

And yet, if we are growing, then why are we so silent? I don't know exactly; the complexity of human existence only permits me to be the leading authority of my own personal experience. Based on what I've seen at this school, it may be because we, like all Columbia students, find it tough to be both students and active leaders. Perhaps we

find it hard not to be cynical and bitter when past attempts to organize and program have met with scant recognition from the media and our fellow student body members. Or maybe it's that after spending some time here we start to believe, deep in our minds, those who insist that we don't have anything of value to contribute to the ongoing debate about the future of this country.

Whatever the reason, we Latinos need to begin to put an end to our partly self-imposed exclusion from this campus if we are ever to do anything about the mostly institutionally imposed exclusion of Latinos and other disadvantaged groups in this country. America needs to learn about Latinos not only because of our increasing numbers, but also because of our valuable labor, our continental history that predates the founding of both this nation and its colonial settlements, and because of the rich linguistic influence that Spanish words have had on American vocabulary. For example, nearly a quarter of all states have names that are Spanish in origin. More importantly, in this time of narrowing minds, America needs our Latino perspective for the future.

This nation needs to learn and understand Latinos if she is to successfully come to grips with her multicultural reality. Many people don't realize that Latinos cannot be easily divided into black and white camps because from our foundation we have been a strictly mixed people. The painful clash of the "Old World" with the "New World," beginning in 1492, created an ethnic people that by itself never existed. Latin America, has its primary roots in African, Spanish, and the indigenous culture (Pueblos, Caribs, Arawaks, Tainos, Mayans, Incas, and the Aztecs to name a few), but also has key contributions from Non-Iberian Europeans and Asians. It was a multi-racial, multinational, multi-class society long before the word "multicultural"

became equated with the lofty politically correct corniness of "We Are The World." This is not to say that our existence has been "peachy," and that everything has been great south of the border; many problems (like AIDS) have yet to be acknowledged or addressed in Latin America. However, the different ways that we Latinos learn to deal with differences in our culture, religion, and language provide helpful insights to what are problems not limited to North America. America benefits from hearing the complexities of the Latino experience because everyone benefits from listening to themselves; for more than 500 years, we too have been America.

Newspapers, television, radio, and other forms of mass communication have always helped to educate American society. However, if the media is going to continue to serve and educate wisely, it needs the participation of all parts of society to set up the curriculum that it teaches. Latinos and other people of color not only need to be seen, but read and heard as well; the increasing strength of anti-immigrant, anti-affirmative action, and anti-education sentiment around the nation makes it difficult and irresponsible for people with contrasting viewpoints to remain idle.

For me, this means it is time to become part of a local medium whose influence extends past this campus to alumni and the press at large. It means helping to force the media to stop panning around us and start opening its lens a little wider. It means submitting my perspective every so often for the entire world to hear and critique. However, while I once thought this would mean "dancing with the devil by the pale moonlight," Maria Hinojosa, reminded me of an old *refran* that many Latino parents have, at one time or another, told their children.

No hay mal que por bien no venga.

Loosely translated: There is no evil that good cannot come out of.

Palante siempre, mi gente.

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