

And What Will Become of Children
Like Miguel Fernandez?
“Y Que Pasara Con Jovenes Como Miguel Fernandez?”

Education, Immigration and the Future
of Latinos in the United States

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It is a common cliché to say that the youth are our future, but if this is the case for Latinos in the US then we have good reason to be worried. Latinos have the highest dropout rates and the lowest college attendance rates ([Garcia 2001](#)). On most measures of academic performance we are overrepresented in the negative categories (i.e. enrollment in special education and remedial programs, and the number of students who are suspended or expelled, etc.) and we are underrepresented in the positive categories (Honors and advanced placement courses, gifted and talented programs) ([Meier, et. al. 1991](#)). In higher education, we are not at the bottom of the achievement hierarchy, but since the advent of high stakes testing in several states across the country, more and more Latino students are leaving high school without diplomas, and are unable to matriculate to college ([Haney 2003](#)).

Miguel Hernandez is one such student. Miguel is from the South Bronx, a community once described by a presidential candidate as a “hell hole”, and by yet another as the poorest census tract in the United States ([Kozol 1995](#)). Despite these negative characterizations of his community, for Miguel the South Bronx is home. He doesn’t think much about the fact his neighborhood has some of the highest rates for asthma, teen pregnancy or juvenile homicide in the nation, or for that matter, the highest unemployment rates in the City ([Gonzalez 2004](#)). The litter on the streets, the deteriorated and dilapidated buildings, or the long walk he must take to the subway to get to and from school doesn’t bother him either. For Miguel, the South Bronx is where his abuelita, his familia, his many, many primos all live, as does his novia Sonja and Wilson, his best friend. In fact, Miguel has a sense of pride about being from the Bronx, and he’ll be the first to tell you that it is home to Jennifer Lopez, the world famous New York Yankees, and a long list of notable Latinos.

Although I was born in Manhattan and raised in Brooklyn, I have a connection to the South Bronx too. Unlike Miguel my thoughts of the South Bronx aren’t so pleasant. When I think of South the Bronx, the image that comes most quickly to my mind is one of violence and danger. I remember when the South Bronx was burning in the 1970s as a result of fires set by arsonists working for absentee landlords who would rather burn down beat up old buildings to collect insurance than improve them for the people who lived there (([Wallace and Wallace 1998](#), [Wunsch 2001](#)) My Grandmother lived in the Mitchell Houses on Willis Avenue and 138th Street for over twenty years. The projects are still there, but they are no longer regarded as such a rough or dangerous place to live as they once were. The South Bronx is in the midst of a revival now ([Jonnes 1986](#), [Wunsch 2001](#)) and gentrification has brought with it a change in residents. Of course as property values rise and old buildings are torn down those who cannot afford to pay market rate rents - people like Miguel’s family - will be pushed out.

When I used to visit my grandmother as a boy we were not allowed to go outside to play on the swings or monkey bars. My father told us that dangerous hoodlums controlled the play areas, and

perverts lurked in the stairways and alleys. My cousin, who also lived in the South Bronx, served as a proof that my father's dire warnings were no joke. He was murdered at the age of fourteen; stabbed to death because he made the mistake of refusing to give up his hard-earned leather jacket to a couple of young thieves. There used to be a community center named after him off of Gunhill Road, but that too has become a victim of gentrification and has since been torn down.

Times have changed since the bad old days in the 1960's and '70s, and the gentrification that prompted the makeover of Manhattan in the 1990s has finally hit even this neighborhood. Many of the worse projects, and many run down tenements have been torn down and replaced by single-family homes. The changes are striking and despite the obvious improvement, they are somewhat disturbing. For someone like me who has been away from the South Bronx for many years, it's easy to get a strange and eerie feeling when walking through the neighborhood. As you observe all of the new construction and the new homes that have been built, you get a clear sense that the neighborhood is being improved for people who do not live there yet, and while there are many sites from the past that are familiar, there is also a lot that is new and strange and that seems out of place. The elevated train still runs along Jerome Avenue, and many of the bodegas and White Castles I once frequented are still on Fordham Road. But things look different to me. The neighborhood is still home to some of the poorest people in New York City ([Wunsch 2001](#), [Jonnes 2002](#)), and still has a reputation for crime, violence, drug dealing and gangs. But the Bronx, like the rest of New York City is changing as property values rise and the middle class moves back to reclaim once blighted areas.

This kind of change means that for Miguel, his family, and thousands of other recent immigrants, the South Bronx may be a temporary home. Interestingly, Miguel is not unaware of the changes being brought about by gentrification and what it may mean for in the long term for his family, but he doesn't feel threatened by it either. He and his family regard the South Bronx as a temporary stop on their journey to progress; a place that served its purpose when they first moved in, but not a place to become attached to. His family didn't pick the South Bronx out of a catalogue when they arrived from the Dominican Republic. They moved there because housing was cheap and his mother's cousin was able to help them find a place to live not far from her. They are well aware of the problems in the neighborhood so for them, the greatest sign of upward mobility would be to leave the South Bronx for good.

When she arrived, Miguel's mother was unmarried and raising six children on her own. She knew she would need family support to get by in this strange new country, so she moved to the South Bronx without a second thought, despite the warnings about danger that she received from others. Like most immigrants, she came full of hopes and dreams, with high expectations, and a firm belief that life in America would be better. Better because that's what everyone had told her about America since she was a child, and better because it would allow her and her children to escape the unhappiness and hardships they knew in the D.R. She didn't dwell on the fact that when she left she was leaving behind a whole network of extended familia and community. All she thought about was that she was trading it in for - the possibility of eventual prosperity in the United States of America. For her, the South Bronx was merely a starting point on the way to that better life. Eventually she hoped that she and her children would find a home with a yard in the suburbs of New Jersey or Long Island. But for now, they like thousands of immigrants before ([Tobier 1998](#)) they would find a way to make it in America by starting in the South Bronx. With faith and determination they could view the hardships they encountered as temporary obstacles; bumps in the road that one day they could look back upon just like life in their hard lives in the D.R., as another part of what they had overcome.

This is the Faustian bargain that many immigrants embrace. They give up a world they know for one that is completely foreign based on the belief that they can find a way to make the new country work for them ([Portes and Rumbaut 2001](#)). They are overwhelmingly risk takers, brave enough to settle in a strange land where they do not speak the language or know the customs, because they hold on to the tenuous belief that with hard work good fortune will eventually come their way. Latino immigrants and their children are people of the future. They are a people whose gaze is so firmly affixed on the promise of a better life that it becomes possible for them to endure a host of hardships and inconveniences that might set others back completely. They are a people who manage to hang on to their optimism even in miserable ghettos like the South Bronx.

Miguel was only eleven when his family arrived from the Dominican Republic. When he first arrived he spoke no English and he often felt afraid and intimidated at school. On the playground other Latino kids who barely spoke English themselves, teased him because he spoke only Spanish. For years, he felt intimidated when riding the subway with bigger kids from other parts of the city. They were mean and aggressive. They pushed to get a seat, they used foul language, and they knew how to scare a person with little more than a stare. Those days of being scared are over now, and Miguel isn't afraid or intimidated anymore. He's not a big kid, but he knows how to carry himself and he knows how to stare back and give the look that lets to others know he's not a punk. Because he's no longer afraid, Miguel is now at ease in the South Bronx. The many obstacles he has confronted and overcome have made him stronger and have not dampened his optimism about the future in the slightest.

Miguel attends Walton High School, a school that gained notoriety during the 2003-'04 academic year because of severe overcrowding. I worked with the school during that academic year and was amazed to learn that it had an enrollment of 4,200 even though it was built to accommodate no more than 2,000.⁽¹⁾ The school was in the news on more than one occasion that year because of rising concerns about school violence. In response, Mayor Michael Bloomberg placed Walton on his list of unsafe schools and promised to do what ever it would take to make it safe again, even if it took placing a policeman in every classroom. As a result of the Mayor's posturing students at Walton were required to wait on long lines each morning, sometimes in sub zero temperatures, to pass through metal detectors before entering the school building. Once inside, I was often struck by the irony that while the officials were fastidious in their security screening, they paid little attention to whether or not students were actually attending class.

Despite less than ideal conditions at his school, Miguel is a diligent and dedicated student. He appreciates the importance of getting a good education to achieve his dreams so he studies hard and strives to do his best. However, as the eldest of six children Miguel also works thirty hours a week at a local fast food restaurant to help support his family. He works after school, sometimes till 10:00 pm, and every weekend for eight to ten hours a day, but he never complains. He knows that his mother needs the money to pay the bills and he likes the fact that he's able to buy clothes he likes to wear with what's left over.

Miguel is well liked by his teachers. They appreciate his positive attitude, honesty, hard work and the respect he shows to them. These traits along with the excellent grades he earns, have distinguished him from his peers. On more than one occasion he has been singled out by the principal as a positive example; a person other students should strive to emulate. He receives ample helpings of praise and encouragement from his teachers who tell him with great confidence that if he keeps up the good work his future will be bright.

However, his guidance counselor knows better. After his second attempt, Miguel was still not able to pass the English portion of the New York State Regents exam. Though he's lived in this country eight years and attended schools in New York City, his command of English remains weak, and without a Regents diploma, Miguel will not be able to attend a public college. To complicate things even further, Miguel is also an undocumented immigrant. Though his counselor has told him that there is legislation pending in the U.S. Congress that would allow undocumented immigrants to receive financial aid and to attend public universities, the combination of his testing troubles and legal complications has caused him to re-evaluate his goals.

Instead of college, Miguel plans to stay on at the fast food restaurant. His manager has praised him for his reliability and work ethic, and promised that he would recommend him for an assistant manager's position in six months if he hangs on. This would mean he would be entitled to health benefits and a salary close to \$30,000 a year. For Miguel, the possibility of a stable job and a position of authority is a reward so alluring that he decides it makes far more sense to hang in there rather than working to pass the Regents exam at night school.

In my work with schools, (2) I have met many students like Miguel. Though not all are as studious, as focused, or as disciplined, there's no shortage of promise and potential among the students I meet. This is especially true for those who have recently migrated from the Caribbean and Latin America. In cities like New York, Boston, Oakland, Los Angeles and Newark, the Latino students I meet, especially those who are recent immigrants, are often ambitious and respectful toward adults. They are also full of hope about the future. Like their parents, they have the drive, the work ethic and the persistence to take advantage of opportunities that come their way, and unlike so many urban youth, they have the will to find a way to improve the circumstances they find themselves in.

Of course, it is risky to generalize or to overstate the importance of will and work ethic. As the experiences of young people like Miguel show us, drive and optimism can sometimes take you only so far. When you live in a community like the South Bronx, sometimes circumstances beyond your control -- the school you attend, the neighborhood you live in, whether or not any jobs are available -- are far more powerful in determining how far you'll go or where you'll end up. Attitude and drive certainly count too and the research literature suggests that many immigrant students are willing to work hard and make sacrifices, particularly when compared to U.S.-born youth ([Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001](#)).

As part of a study on high schools in Boston ([Noguera 2004](#)), I conducted an interview with a Honduran honors student from English High School in Boston. During the course of our conversation I asked her about the source of her motivation to succeed in school. With a sense of clear resolve and a wisdom that seemed extraordinary for a person her age, she informed me. "If I don't do well in school my mother told me she will send me back to Honduras to wash clothes. That's what she did there, and I know for sure that I don't want to do that. You can hardly live there on the money you make from washing clothes. That's why we had to leave Honduras. People are barely surviving over there. So I try to do my best in school. If I can get into college and become a nurse or something I'm going to be able to help my family and myself. I definitely don't want to end up washing no clothes."

Of course, not all of the Latino students I meet are so full of drive, determination or clarity about their goals. Some are angry and sullen, less optimistic about the future, less focused about the purpose of their education and less inclined to believe in the elusive American Dream. These are

usually the second and third generation Latino students. The ones whose ties to home -- Mexico, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic -- are more remote. Unlike their immigrant counterparts, these are children of the present. Children who are so consumed with surviving, with getting by, with learning how to make it from day to day, that they make no plans for the future, and often have trouble contemplating life past eighteen. They are also the ones who speak broken Spanish, if they speak it at all, and who identify as Latino, Chicano, Hispanic, or simply claim ties to the clique in their hood.

The research literature on the socialization of Latino students has identified this disturbing trend, one that results in the transformation of hopeful Latino immigrant youth into angry and frustrated Hispanic Americans ([Portes and Rumbaut 2001](#), [Zentella 2002](#)). In a reversal of past patterns, assimilation no longer serves as the pathway into mainstream American culture and middle class status for many Latinos as it once did for European immigrants. Instead, the evidence suggests that the socialization associated with acculturation and assimilation is sometimes harmful to academic achievement and performance of Latino students ([Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001](#)).⁽³⁾ Interestingly, the research also suggests a similar pattern with respect to health and wellbeing. It turns out that recent Latino immigrants are less likely to smoke, contract heart disease, diabetes, cancer or to have out of wedlock births ([Hayes-Bautista 2001](#)).

Berkeley anthropologist John Ogbu tried to explain the difference between Latinos, which he categorized as “caste-like”, non-voluntary minorities, and earlier European immigrants who were drawn to the United States voluntarily. According to Ogbu, because the non-voluntary minorities were incorporated through coercion - conquest, colonization or slavery ([Ogbu 1988](#)), they were more likely to develop oppositional attitudes toward assimilation, and by extension, toward school. Though Ogbu’s theory has been widely embraced by scholars of immigration ([Noguera 2004](#)), try as he might his framework never really worked for Latinos. There is simply too much diversity among Latinos; while some might be categorized as non-voluntary immigrants (e.g. Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and possibly Panamanians), others (especially those from Central and South America) clearly came to the U.S. voluntarily; at least if fleeing war, repression or hunger can be considered a voluntary move.

Once they arrive in the U.S., new forces take over in shaping social identities, and Ogbu paid little attention to how variations in social context influence patterns of social adaptation. A Mexican arriving in L.A., or a Dominican arriving in Washington Heights in New York, can function in a monolithic culture for quite some time. However, for Latinos who settle in a community that is more diverse, new forms of affiliation may emerge and the significance attached to national identities may melt away, particularly among the youth. For a young person like Miguel, identifying as a Dominican becomes less important when your friends are not just from the D.R. but also from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Central America. Hybrid identities forged through cultural fusion happen naturally. Perceptions of self invariably become even more complicated when you look Black, at least by U.S. definitions, speak English with an Ebonics accent, and when the music you listen to is a mix of hip hop, merengue, reggae ton, house and rock. Even as the steady arrival of new Latino immigrants gradually begins to change the face and the character of American culture, our presence here also transforms who we are, and most importantly, who we are becoming.

The patterns evident in education mirror other disturbing trends for Latinos in the United States. Latinos in the U.S. constitute the youngest, fastest growing, yet poorest sub-group of American society ([Smith 2002](#)). We stand out from other groups because in several states, we are both more likely to be employed and more likely to be poor (Clark 1998). This is because more often than

not, Latinos are trapped in the lowest paying jobs. We are the laborers, the busboys, maids, nannies, gardeners, mechanics, and waiters. We specialize in doing the dirty work, the work U.S.-born Americans reject. We remove the asbestos from buildings, we handle the toxic waste, and we take care of the sick and the aged. In cities across America we wait patiently on street corners for contractors seeking cheap labor, and we take the subways and busses early in the morning to arrive on time to watch the children of those who earn salaries exponentially greater than our own ([Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001](#)).

We are the backbone of the U.S. economy, and we are despised because of it. Instead of gratitude and appreciation for all we do, we are subjected to resentment and scorn, and increasingly overt hostility and violence. We are accused of taking American jobs, of making neighborhoods unsafe, of deteriorating the quality of life in affluent areas, and spreading communicable diseases ([Cornelius 2002](#)). Though American society is historically a nation of immigrants, and though increasingly the U.S. economy is dependent upon the labor of Latino immigrants in particular, we are treated as a burden, as unwanted parasites, and problems that must be tolerated, or if possible, removed.

Education should serve as our ladder out of poverty. Just as it has for other groups in the past, education should be the source of opportunity and the pathway to a better life. Unfortunately, more often than not, the schools that serve Latinos are not unlike Miguel's Walton High School. Such schools have failed to serve as the vehicle through which our collective dreams and aspirations can be fulfilled. Too many Latino students attend schools that are over-crowded, under-funded, and woefully inadequate in terms of the quality of education they provide ([Garcia 2001](#)). More often than not, Latino students are trapped in the worst schools, and more than other ethnic groups, Latinos are likely to attend schools that are segregated on the basis of race and class ([Orfield and Eaton 1996](#)). For all of these reasons, Latinos have thus far, had limited success in using education as a vehicle to fulfill collective dreams and aspirations.

Of course, our hardships are relative. Compared to those we leave behind in our countries of origin, many of us are far better off. That is why we are able to send money home, to support those who are still struggling and barely surviving. And that is why so many more continue to come. The U.S. is the land of opportunity, and though there are always sacrifices and costs associated with leaving, for those who risk the journey, there are also often rewards. Our home countries know this too, and increasingly, the governments of Latin America regard us -- Latino immigrants in the US - as a prized resource. The remittances we send home are a stable source of foreign exchange, worth more than oil exported from Mexico, the bananas shipped out of Central America, or the tourists who visit Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic ([Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 2004](#)).

Immigration is a complicated issue, one that does not lend itself to simplistic, dichotomous analysis. In 1996 I participated in a debate over Proposition 187; the first of several wedge issue measures, used by conservatives in California to mobilize their base (e.g. white voters), against a vulnerable scapegoat, namely us. I was asked to debate an economist from UC Davis about the merits and fairness of the proposed law, which if passed would deny undocumented immigrants, or aliens as they preferred to describe us, access to public services like health care and education. In response to his assertion that the law was not racist but merely a rational response to the fact that immigrants were displacing Americans in the labor market and taking unfair advantage of public services, I pointed out that even if the law was approved by the voters it would not succeed in curtailing illegal immigration. I suggested that the reason why so many immigrants were making the dangerous trip across the border was not in pursuit of education, health care or other

social services but because of the tremendous imbalance in wealth between the U.S. and Latin America. Certainly it was not the attraction of California's public schools, widely regarded as some of the most inequitable in the nation ([Oakes 2003](#)). Rather, immigration is driven by the need to escape poverty and suffering, by the hope that success will make it possible to send money home, and by the often unrealistic belief that by leaving it will be possible to obtain a small piece of the American Dream that has been so creatively marketed to the rest of the world.

Speaking in front of liberal and idealistic undergraduates at UC Berkeley, it was easy to win the debate against a conservative economist, but I knew even then that we would lose the larger battle. Not only was Proposition 187 approved by over two thirds of California voters, it set the stage for a string of other "grassroots" initiatives aimed at rolling back gains in civil rights that had been made in previous years. The end to race-based affirmative action policies in higher education, the end to bi-lingual education under the so-called English only initiative, the get tough three strikes law, and the juvenile crime initiative which lowered the age at which adolescents could be prosecuted as adults, all had harmful effects on the status and well being of Latinos in California.⁽⁴⁾ In yet another public debate, this time against Ward Connelly, the African American member of the University of California Board of Regents who has spearheaded the effort to eliminate affirmative action in higher education, I pointed out that if we had to rely on a referendum to bring an end to slavery forced servitude might still be around. As noted legal philosopher, John Rawls, has pointed out, democracy in the form of majority rule, can be the worst form of tyranny (Rawls). Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, this series of race-based initiatives were adopted at just the time that California was becoming a non-white majority state ([Clark 1998](#)), and while the new laws have not deterred the growth of the Latino population in California or throughout the nation, they have made the path to progress much more difficult.

I saw the effects of crushed dreams and vanquished aspirations vividly during a recently visit to New Bedford, MA, an old industrial town on the south eastern coast of Massachusetts. I was asked to assist the city in a planning effort designed to reduce the number of juvenile homicides. Over the last year, there had been a startling rise in the number of adolescents who had been murdered in the city, startling because none of the community leaders could understand why. They had a hunch that maybe the high unemployment in New Bedford might be a factor (the official estimate was 25% at the time of my visit in May 2004), or similarly that the high school drop-out rate which officially was listed at 12%, but unofficially was presumed to be closer to 50%, might also have something to do with the problem. But these were factors and not causes, and with no way to link these factors to a strategy that might aid the city in preventing more violence, there was no reason to believe that the carnage would be abated on its own.

I was asked to conduct a workshop on youth violence prevention with community leaders to help them to gain a better understanding of how various factors were linked to this social phenomenon, and hopefully to begin to devise a strategy for prevention. With all of the key stake holders from the city present, including: school district officials, members of the City Council, churches, non-profits, the police and probation departments, etc., an interesting discussion unfolded about the lack of opportunity for youth in New Bedford. Though no concrete solutions emerged from the meeting, we did leave with an agreement to do two things: 1) to include young people in the process of formulating solutions to the problem; and 2) to keep this group of stakeholders meeting and planning together until there were clear signs that progress was being made.

All of us, myself included, left the meeting hopeful that we had started a process that would have a meaningful impact on this pressing problem. Later that evening, I was asked to speak at a community cultural celebration in a large high school auditorium. I generally don't like being

asked to give lectures between performances by local hip hop artists and Cape Verdean folk dancers, but I obliged with the understanding that I would keep my remarks very short. I knew before I spoke that the juvenile homicides was a big issue for the community because earlier in the day I had passed by homes where large banners were hung carrying pictures of young people who had recently been killed. Many of the banners and posters carried a simple message, imploring all who would take time to read to “STOP THE VIOLENCE”. Aware of how salient the issue was I tried to speak directly to the problem of youth violence that the community was grappling with, but to do so with a sense of hope about what might be done to address the problem. After my remarks, I was surprised to learn that the MC wanted to take questions from the floor rather than returning immediately to the entertainment. I was even more surprised to see a young Latino male raise his hand immediately without any prodding from the MC or myself.

Speaking loudly and with no apparent apprehension, the young man declared: “Maybe if there was something for young people to do in New Bedford we wouldn’t be killing each other. It’s boring like hell here. No jobs, no colleges, no places to hang out. I think people are killing each other because they’re bored to death.” It was an interesting thesis, one that hadn’t been considered by the group of community leaders earlier in the day, and a comment that left me at a loss for a response. Having teenagers of my own who often complain of boredom, I responded by saying that boredom generally emanates from within, and that the only remedy for boredom was imagination. I encouraged him not to sit back and wait for someone to offer him a job but to be creative and think of ways that he might create opportunities on his own. Even as I made my suggestion I knew that if pressed I might not be able to come up with any creative examples for self-employment, but I still felt that the young man needed a sense of empowerment instead of seeing himself as a helpless victim.

As it turned out, I didn’t have to offer any concrete suggestions. The next hand up was that of a middle-aged Mexican immigrant. Though he struggled with English, he readily shared his own story with the audience, directing his remarks to the young man who had spoken first. He explained that he had moved to New Bedford from Mexico five years ago. When he arrived he knew no one, so he took a job cleaning fish and earning minimum wage. After two years of dirty, backbreaking work, he said he was able to save enough to open a restaurant. He said he now owns two Mexican restaurants in New Bedford and employees twenty people. He then said that the only thing keeping him from doing more to help the community were the young hoodlums who have robbed him several times, and most recently forced one of his employees to be hospitalized as a result of a beating during a hold up. Sounding not unlike a conservative Republican, the man challenged the young people present not to be afraid of hard work, but to get off their butts, and to stop waiting for someone to give them something.

Again, I was taken aback by the direction our conversation had taken. Stumbling to figure out what I might say in response to the immigrants challenge, I was bailed out by a young Latina who was so eager to speak that she jumped out of her seat and demanded the microphone. Speaking with passion and defiance, she blurted out “I’m sick of hearing people in New Bedford put young people down. I ain’t going to clean no fish for minimum wage and I shouldn’t have to. I went to school right here at this high school (the meeting actually took place at New Bedford High School), and I had plans to go to college after graduation. But I got into problems with the law, and now I have a criminal record. A lot of businesses won’t hire you if you have a record. I’m willing to work hard, but I need to get a chance.”

Her remarks and the passion with which they were delivered prompted several people in the audience to applaud, and now it was up to me to make sense of the exchange. How would I

acknowledge the truths inherent in both perspectives: the hopefulness of the new immigrant, the frustration and resignation of the second generation? Given the late hour and the bad set up for an extended conversation, I punted. I encouraged the young woman, and the young man who'd spoken earlier to get together with the restaurateur after the meeting to find out about a job and to learn how he managed to do what he had accomplished.

Reflecting on my visit to New Bedford I was compelled to recognize that the clash in perspectives symbolized a larger division among Latinos -- the newly arrived full of hope and expectation, and the fully settled, who understand the reality of dead end jobs and racial discrimination. Both perspectives are rooted in "truth" and an understanding of reality, but neither perspective provides a clear way for Latinos as a group to move forward. Can hard work alone help students like Miguel whose educational opportunities are limited by the kind of school he attends, and whose chances for mobility through employment are constrained by the labor market in his community? Will anger and resentment for those who object to their second-class status help? How do we harness the energy and drive of the newcomers but at the same time refuse to accept a permanent place on the lower rungs of American society?

These are the big questions that face Latinos in America, but who's providing the answers? We are at a moment of incredible possibility. Latinos are being courted by both major parties as swing voters with the ability to decide state and even national elections. Media moguls, baseball team owners, and fast food restaurants now recognize us as an important consumer market, but to recognize that we can vote and spend money says very little about our potential to alter our status in this country. If we are to move from the lower tiers of society and not become a permanent underclass, and if our communities, schools and social institutions are to provide the support and nurturing that our children so desperately need, we will need a new direction and a new strategy. Until that time, we will remain like Miguel -- industrious and hopeful but trapped in circumstances that stifle our ambitions and dreams. We can and we must do more, and those who have more, our small but growing middle class, have an even greater responsibility to act.

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