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Latino Adaptations and Connections in Rural America

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"(In this article) I offer a personal account of rural Latinos, partly through the lives of my parents, to explain their adaptations to and contributions in America. Who are rural Latinos, how did they arrive, and what are their experiences and issues?"
Preface

Rural Latinos have been a topic of my research and teaching since 1971, starting with my academic appointment to the University of California, Davis. Just before my move to Davis, I was part of a Ford Foundation team of agricultural scientists in Pakistan, assisting Dr. Norman Borlaug, 1969-71. In 1970, Dr. Norman Borlaug received the Nobel Peace Prize for the “Green Revolution” with high-yielding varieties of wheat from México.

At UC Davis until July 1994, I taught, co-founded Chicana/o Studies, consulted, advised and researched Latinos, and also co-founded International Agricultural Development. I covered a range of topics on Latinos, from their farming and employment to the related demographic transformations of small towns. In July 1994, I joined Michigan State University and pursued more research on rural Latinos and communities throughout the Midwest. In July 1998, I joined the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. as the Founding Director of its Latino Center. There I advanced collections, exhibitions, and contributions of Latinos within America.

It wasn’t until the deaths of my father in 1994 and my mother in 1999, that I began to factor my family background into my professional experience. As I drafted a family “portrait,” to share with my children and siblings, I noticed that my early life and parents shaped most of my academic pursuits.

Thus, I offer a personal account of rural Latinos, partly through the lives of my parents, to explain their adaptations to and contributions in America. Who are rural Latinos, how did they arrive, and what are their experiences and issues?

Heritage

My father migrated to the United States from Sinaloa’s Sierra Madre of northern Mexico. He entered California alone but legally in 1923 at age 15. With a US entry permit that cost him $8.00 at the US border of San Diego, he established a life of hard work and dedication to family and business. His father was murdered in 1916 and he didn’t want to burden his mother who had six other children to feed. Unable to speak English and with practically no formal schooling, he joined a trainload of others like him bound for Wyoming where they labored on the transnational railway. At age 20 he migrated to Riverside, California and worked in citrus groves as an “irrigator and farm hand.” He learned from that experience the value of hard work and developed a skill for buying and selling goods (cooking items, blankets, etc.) to the other workers. In 1928 my father went to a social club called the Alianza Hispana for induction into their community. He “fell in love at first sight” with the pianist-singer at the event and within a few months they eloped and were later married with blessings from her parents in 1929.

My parents learned from my mother’s mother how to operate the family tienda (a grocery store called La Esperanza – The Hope). By 1933 my parents established a wholesale-retail grocery store in Coachella, California. In 1936 they “traded” that business for a store in Carlsbad, California. And with two daughters, they moved the family from the desert to the seacoast near San Diego. In 1938, my mom and dad added another establishment, a small café for Mexican food, called El Charro. In 1940 they converted all assets into a bigger restaurant in Carlsbad called El Mejicano. The timing was bad – with the onset of World War II. Carlsbad was a beach town and lights had to be out at sunset – for fear of Japanese submarine attack. Few people ate out during that fateful time. To make ends meet, my father started a farm for fresh tomatoes on rented land. I was the third born (in 1941) and raised in Carlsbad. By 1950 my siblings included two older sisters, a younger sister and a brother.

Carlsbad, known for tourism, flowers, fruit and vegetables had about 2,200 residents in 1940. It was also a bedroom community for the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps base. The town was segmented into neighborhoods, the biggest with paved streets, where Whites or Anglos lived (situated along the beach front) and a “Mexicantown” or barrio, with dirt streets, next to the railroad tracks running between San Diego and Los Angeles. Carlsbad’s interior territory included ranches.
RURAL LATINOS: ADAPTATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS     RURAL CONNECTIONS

that were former land grants of Mexican origin.

When I was born my parents took a bold step and bought a home and adjacent property near the beach, within the Anglo part of Carlsbad. My father had the means with income from contracts he garnered to feed Mexicans who harvested avocados for the California Avocado Growers Exchange (Calavo) and oranges and lemons for the Sunkist growers. These workers — called “Braceros” — were employed seasonally under an exchange of diplomatic notes with the United States. They lived in labor camps owned and operated by US farmers and businesses. (SEE: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracero_Program).

I grew up on the “White side” of Carlsbad, literally across the railroad tracks from Mexicantown. My sisters and I remember the way our neighbors watched us, as if to say, “don’t play in our front yard.”

My parents became respected merchants, raising five children in the relatively undeveloped landscape of San Diego County. In 1945, father partnered with Manuel Castorena, also a Mexican immigrant, and established C&R Provisions, to provide wholesale food and Mexican products. Castorena and Rochin were the first Mexicans inducted into the local Rotary Club. (Castorena became a City Councilman and eventually Mayor and did not work directly with my dad.) Between 1945-1964, my father expanded his wholesale business to provide mom & pop stores, tienditas, with masa for corn tortillas, dried chiles, deli-meat, panocha (crude brown sugar) and much more. By 1950, he built the largest restaurant for Mexican food in the county, The Acapulco Gardens, with a seating capacity of 500. His education consisted of four years of elementary school, while my mother had only completed middle school. My dad jokingly called himself the Taco King of San Diego. I am sure he was. And my mother, who ran the cafés and the restaurant, worked equally full time while raising all five of us. She never drove a car, drank liquor, wore a swimsuit or complained. Mis padres were married almost 65 years.

FAMILY AND VALUES
I was very fortunate to have been reared within a close-knit familia that valued honesty, hard work, respeto, resourcefulness, orgullo (pride), humility, educación, música, y nuestro lenguaje – el español. We were expected to care for each other; to offer hospitality; show graciousness, look clean and respect our elders: abuelitos, tíos, tías, primos, y más. My dad employed family members and trained them in the business. Some returned to Mexico and became wholesalers of agricultural products.

Our parents were strict, especially with my three sisters, but not with me — I was a man. Our parents wanted to keep us in the family business. I chose instead a different path, showing an independent interest that ran against the grain of tradition. Nonetheless, my parents lovingly supported me once they saw me take charge of my own education and responsibilities.

To date, my sisters say that I had a different set of parents. They had to watch what they wore and how they looked and acted in public. I, on the other hand, had lots more freedom. Mis padres (our parents) reminded us that every action we took reflected on our familia’s reputation, honor, and status. Although men and women were expected to have distinct roles, our parents showed pride in being la familia Rochin-Rodriguez.

OUTSIDE THE HOME
My siblings and I were somewhat sheltered from the community and generally obeyed our parents without asking why or what for? Upon reflection — our familia appeared to act firmly and securely within a context of potential hostility from Anglos. We didn’t plan a strategy for ourselves; we learned to show strength, pride, and business savvy.

What my parents did not share with us kids was the discrimination facing Mexican-Americans, especially from the time of the US Great Depression during the 1930s until the 1960s. Mexicans of California faced these conditions:

- Separate seating in theaters and designated parks for gathering;
- The southern beach front for Mexican families and swimming;
- No representation in local governance;
- Forced English or punishment for speaking Spanish;
- Restricted use of community plunge (swimming pool);
- Roundups by la migra (the Border Patrol) of Mexicans, profiling;
- Separate schools or classrooms – far from equal treatment;
- Residential segregation by limited mortgage lending.

LEARNING MORE
The Rochin-Rodriguez story is not unique. Victor Villasenor recounts a story much like that of my parents in Rain of Gold, his acclaimed novel. Rain of
Gold is mostly about Victor's family, their migration, and settlement in Carlsbad. The Villaseñors - Victor's parents Sal and Lupe - owned a pool hall and bar across the street from my parent's café and grocery store on Roosevelt Street in Carlsbad's Mexicantown, at the time my parents moved there. They became compadres of my parents through Catholic baptism.

Several more novels of Latinos and communities have been published since the mid-1960s, largely in tune to the farm worker movement led by César Chávez. His movement, along with Dolores Huerta and thousands of farm workers, engaged students and families, who in turn, marched and demonstrated for workers and the creation of Chicana/o Studies. The manifestations were for greater recognition, tolerance, understanding, civic-participation, and equal treatment in housing, business and governance. Furthermore, the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce enrolls hundreds of members across the United States. Hispanic Business magazine has operated for over two decades, featuring articles and advertisements from Latino-owned companies with remarkable growth.

Today, some school districts are incorporating stories and histories about US Latinos. But some state legislators have decided to list and ban books that feature the “Mexican” culture and activism within the United States. Their laws infer that ethnic-centered literature is unsuitable for youth.

Yet, rural Latinos are found as educators, police and firemen, service providers, owner-operators of all kinds of businesses, local leaders and, without a doubt, the fastest growing population of rural America. They are settling in every state and niche in rural America with various degrees of integration and acculturation.

This growth of rural Latinos portends both positive and negative situations. Their newness and growth comes amidst national issues of unchecked immigration, rural unemployment, environmental health, the provision of schooling and services for English-challenged newcomers, and a plethora of changes in economic conditions.

I happened to speak Spanish because most of my family did. My grandparents did not speak English. Even my mother's parents, who lived most of their lives in California, spoke to me in Spanish.
Without knowing it, however, our familia spoke a modified Spanish called caló. We spoke with expressions that were not Spanish, per se, from Spain or Mexico. Moreover, our Mexican/Chicano friends and relatives expressed feelings and sentiments in caló. In family and community, caló expressions built camaraderie, understanding, norms of behavior, and bonds of trust. For example: English speakers might say Pop or Mom. Barrio speakers might say, My Father or My Mother; not Pop or Mom. The form being used really derives from Mi Padre or Mi Madre, clearly a possessive expression of belonging.

Unlike “Spanglish,” a blended language involving Code-Switching and Code-Mixing, caló is more informal and conversational, tied to home, and derived between close friends. Traditionally, caló is spoken in barrios for socialization and intimacy. Instead of making someone feel awkward for mispronouncing a word in either English or Spanish, an expression in caló is usually accepted communication. You would not correct the word or term so as to avoid personal embarrassment.

Caló words and expressions became cultural symbols of the Chicano Movement during the 1960s and 1970s, when they were used frequently in literature and poetry. Such language was sometimes known as Floricanto.

Caló is rhythmic and in some cases a type of slang similar to African American Jive. For example: (“Al rato, vato,” means “later dude;” “al rato nos vemos” – see you in a while / “vato” = friend or guy).

Caló is loosely spoken with literal translations – considered unacceptable by Spanish-speaking purists. For example, deme luz is caló for “give me a light.” To the Spanish purest, this means literally: “to give birth” or “to publish.” “Give me a light,” is best said as “deme lumbre.” Similarly, café negro might get you black coffee, but the corrected term is usually café puro or café solo and tinto in Colombia.

It is common to see the word “Barrio” (Neighborhood) spelled as “Varrio,” “Vato” (Dude) spelled as “Bato” or “Güero” (Blonde person) spelled as “Huero” or even “Weddo.” “Baika” for bicycle. [NOTE: phonemes pronounced similarly in Spanish are: c/s, w/hu/gu, r/d, and b/v.]

Colloquial caló includes words and expressions with origins largely unknown, but popularized primarily by Chicanas/os – Mexican Americans of second, third, etc. generations.

**R-rated Caló**

My Father and My Mother, however, looked askance at Pachucos and less educated pochos. We avoided their form of caló. Some Pachucos were second and third generation Americans, but they were called Mexican immigrants. Because my father was a Mexican immigrant and my mother a third generation Mexican-American, My Mother and My Father, did not disparage pachucos; they usually discounted them as not educados.

Pachucos, sometimes called cholas [“la choleria”], were also referred to as “zoot-suiters,” particularly by the US press during the 1940s. They were typecast as gangs that cursed with “maldiciones,” like “cabron,” “no chinges” or “chingasos” (go to blows, a beating). Expletives such as damn, hell, and ‘stronger’ were blamed on Pachucos. Today the gangs we see are not called pachucos. A term often used is carnal, for “blood-brothers” or brotherhood, emanating from those who served time in prison. An offspring of their caló is R-rated.

**Identities**

I did not know that my Spanish was flawed or unique until I served in Colombia, South America. I was a young Peace Corps Volunteer (1962-1964). When I spoke to villagers of Nariño, they sometimes looked at me puzzled, wondering what I had said. I understood them, but why that look? They kindly said they didn’t know “English.” I soon learned Spanish the way they spoke and filtered my caló. I also learned that Spanish varied from country to country. Even Spain has numerous dialects.

While learning Colombian Spanish, I recalled friends and classmates in California who spoke caló. I also remember my annoyance with Spanish teachers who corrected others and me. For that reason, I majored in French. Almost all Spanish teachers in the 1950s, viewed barrio talk as stupidity or ignorance. When I joined UC Davis, I became a strong advocate for teaching Chicanas/os: “Spanish for Native-Speakers (Caló).” Today, UC Davis has a strong enrollment in a sequence of courses for Native Spanish-Speakers, taught in the Department of Spanish.
Some may say that I should have known better about my caló. That it’s street talk and a sign of poor education at home. Maybe so, but my experience in Colombia and other Spanish-speaking countries, has proved to me that caló helped me to communicate. Today, I take pride in the fact that I can communicate with about 400 million Spanish-speaking people in this world. And another 400 million people who rely on English only.

THE WHO, WHY, AND WHAT?
My aim has been to illustrate through personal experience some of the features of rural Latinos: their arrival, integration, adaptations as well as their contributions and issues in rural America. The accounts herein are predicated by my academic research and publications since 1971.

A majority of rural Latinos are immigrants or the first sons and daughters of immigrants from Mexico. They arrive to survive, earn income, raise and support family, and work hard without burdening public services.

Rural Latinos arrive with determination and often create their own businesses. They are hard working and resourceful, focusing on ways to relate to community.

Rural Latinos move to jobs and usually have assistance from family members. Familia is a common thread for their strength, relocation and resilience.

Rural Latinos can be assertive for equal treatment and civil rights. They will join social organizations and worker groups.

Rural Latinos enjoy extended groups through compadres/compadrazco. When times go bad, some form of support is derived from both compadres and familia.

Rural Latinos adapt to America with pride. They want their children to be educated and successful. The price they pay is sometimes very high – assimilating without their culture and language. Some pay that price and adapt to Americanization. It can be hard but done nonetheless, like my parents addressing me in English.

EXAMPLES OF COLLOQUIAL CALÓ:
- Cuate, buddy, bro
- Clecha, classroom
- Centavitos, any amount of money
- Chitear, to cheat
- East Los, East Los Angeles
- El movimiento, the Movement
- Ése, hello, hi, and reference to cool barrio man
- Ficha, money
- Gaba, Gabacho, Anglo-American, white, (derogatory)
- Gachupin, Spaniards in México, (derogatory)
- Huacho like “watcho” or “watchelo”, watch it
- Hayte watcho, see you later
- Al rato watcho, later dude.
- Al rato nos vemos, see you in a while
- Pushame, instead of empujame, to push or push me
- Lonche, instead of almuerzo, lunch
- Mocoso, tike or mischievous child, snotty (mucous)
- Simón, instead of sí, an emphatic YES.
- Chale, NO or No Way
- Échale — get with it
- Chicano/a, Mexican-American female/male
- Mi familia or mi raza, for friends and/or cuates
- Que suave, how cool
- El mero-mero, the ‘big guy,” top dog, someone high in social circles
- ¿Qué hubo?: What’s happening, usually sounds like “Cue’vole”

EXAMPLES OF R-RATED CALÓ:
- Ganga, the gang, the guys
- Grifa, marijuana [Grifo, user], whereas urban Spanish Grifa usually references water type
- Mi chava, my girlfriend; ol’lady was also used
- Una chavalona is a young good-looking female
- Vatos - friends, dudes, guys
- Chola, India, Indian, mixed blood – (derogatory terms)
- Pendejo, fool
- Lambiche, kiss ass
- Camaradas, homeboys/ and girls
- Hecho tiempo conmigo - Someone did time with me
- Chuco, young punk – “dandy zoot-suitor” 1940s, juvenile delinquent
- Buey, for bro or brother
- Fila, flero, knife
- ¡Hijole!, son of a gun!, an exclamation, like darn it!
- La ruca, la loca, reference to females
- Chanta, for “chance.
- Chote, for “house or cell”
- Chapete, for “a stupid or worthless person”
- Raza, persons of similar heritage, perspective and/or tradition