

HISPANIC

Hi.spa'nick. 1. Spanish, *adjective*. 2. Latin American, *adjective*. 3. Hispano, *noun*. An American citizen or resident of Spanish descent. 4. Ducking under the cyclone fence, *noun*. 5. Seen running from the scene of the crime, *adjective*. Clinging to a raft off the Florida coast. Elected mayor in New Jersey. Elevated to bishop or traded to the San Diego Padres. Awarded the golden pomegranate by the U.S. Census Bureau: "most fertile." Soon, an oxymoron: America's largest minority. An utter absurdity: "destined to outnumber blacks." A synonym for the future (salsa having replaced catsup on most American kitchen tables). Madonna's daughter. Sammy Sosa's son. Little Elián and his Great Big Family. A jillarioso novel about ten sisters, their sorrows and joys and intrauterine devices. The new face of American Protestantism: Evangelical minister, tats on his arms; wouldn't buy a used car from. Highest high school dropout rate; magical realism.

The question remains: Do Hispanics exist?

I tell myself, on mornings like this—the fog has burned off early—that I am really going to give it up. Hispanicism cannot interest me anymore. My desk a jumble of newspaper clippings. Look at all this! Folders. It looks like a set for *The Makropolous Case*. I will turn instead to the death agony of a moth, the gigantic shuddering of lantern-paper wings. Or I will count the wrinkles on Walden Pond. I will write some of those constipated, low-paying, fin de siècle essays about the difficulty of *saying* anything in this, our age. *Visi d'arte*, from now on, as Susan Sontag sang so memorably from the chapel of Sant' Andrea della Valle.

For years now I have pursued Hispanicism, as a solitary, self-appointed inspector in an old Hitchcock will dog some great hoax; amassing data; abstractedly setting down his coffee cup at a precarious angle to its saucer, to the stack of papers and books and maps on which it rests, because he is drawn to some flash-lit, spyglassed item in the morning paper. I am catching them up, slowly, inexorably, confident of the day—soon—when I shall publish my findings.

Soon. I take my collapsible double-irony on tour to hotel ballroom conferences and C-SPAN-televized luncheons and "Diversity Week" lectures at universities. For a fee, I rise to say I am not Latin American, because I am Hispanic. I am Hispanic because I live in the United States. *Thank you*. (For a larger fee, I will add there is no such thing as a Hispanic. *Thank you*.)

But this morning I have decided, after all, to join the hoax.

Hispanic has had its way with me. I suspect also with you. The years have convinced me that Hispanic is a noun that can't lose. An adjective with legs. There is money in it.

Hispanic (the noun, the adjective) has encouraged the Americanization of millions of Hispanics. But at the same time, Hispanic—the ascending tally announced by the U.S. Census Bureau—has encouraged the Latinization of non-Hispanics.

As a Hispanic, as a middle-aged noun, like Oscar Wilde descending to gaol, I now take my place in the booth provided within that unglamorous American fair devised by the Richard Nixon administration in 1973 (O.M.B. Statistical Directive 15). Within the Nixonian fair are five exposition halls:

BLACK;
WHITE;
ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER;
NATIVE AMERICAN/ESKIMO;
HISPANIC.

They aren't much, these drafty rooms—about what you'd expect of government issue. Nixon's fair attempted to describe the world that exists by portraying a world that doesn't. Statisticians in overalls moved India—*ouffff*—that heavy, spooled and whirligigged piece of Victorian mahogany, over beneath the green silk tent of Asia. Mayan Indians from the Yucatán were directed to the Hispanic pavilion (Spanish colonial), which they must share with Argentine tangoistas, Colombian drug dealers, and Russian Jews who remember Cuba from the viewpoint of Miami. Of the five ports, Hispanic has the least

reference to blood. There is no such thing as Hispanic blood. (*Do I not bleed?*) Though I meet young Hispanics who imagine they descend from it.

Nixon's fair does at least succeed in portraying the United States in relation to the world. One can infer a globe from a pentagram.

Over my head, as I write these words, a New World Indian is singing in the language of the conquistador. (A Korean contractor, hired by my landlord, has enlisted a tribe of blue-jumpered Mexican Indians to reroof the apartment building where I live.) In trustworthy falsetto, the young man lodges a complaint against an intangible mistress unfond, as high above him as the stars, and as cold. Yesterday, as he was about to hoist a roll of tar paper, this same young man told me the choir of roofers, excepting "*el patron*," originate from a single village in a far state of Mexico. And a few minutes ago, I overheard them all—the Mexicans and the Korean contractor—negotiating their business in pidgin (Spanish, curiously; I would have expected English). Then my ceiling shook with their footfalls. And with bolts of tar paper flung upon it. My library leapt in its shelves—those ladies and gentlemen, so unaccustomed.

Tomorrow, having secured my abstractions against the rainy season, the Mexican Indians will fly away to some other rooftop in the city, while I must remain at this desk.

Why must I? Because my literary agent has encouraged from me a book that answers a simple question: *What do Hispanics mean to the life of America?* He asked me that question several years ago in a French restaurant on East Fifty-seventh

Street, as I watched a waiter approach our table holding before him a shimmering *îles flottantes*.

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But those were palmier days. Before there were Hispanics in America, there was another fictitious, inclusive genus: the Latin Lover. The Latin Lover was male counterpart to the vamp. He specialized in the inarticulate—"dark"—passions; perhaps a little cruel. He was mascaraed, mute, prepotent. Phantom, sheikh, or matador, he was of no philosophy but appetite. His appetite was blond.

White America's wettest perdition fantasy has always been consanguinity with some plum-colored thigh. The Latin Lover was a way of meeting the fantasy halfway. This was not a complicated scenario. Nor was Hollywood fussy about casting it. Ramon Navarro, Rudolph Valentino, Ezio Pinza, Rossano Brazzi, Ricardo Montalban, Prince Rainier, George Chakiris, all descended from the dusky isles of Cha-Cha.

Probably the last unironic Latin Lover conscripted into American fantasy was Omar Sharif, hired to seduce Peter O'Toole.

But, by then, Lucille Ball had undermined the fantasy by domesticating the Latin Lover. In the 1950s, Lucille Ball insisted upon casting her real-life husband as her fictional husband, against the advice of CBS Television executives. Desi Arnaz was not mute, nor were his looks smoldering. In fact his eyes bulged with incredulity at *la vida loca* with Lucy. Curiously, Lucy was the madcap for having married a Cuban bandleader in the first place. Curiously, Desi was the solid American citi-

zen (though he did wear a smoking jacket at home). Soon, millions of Americans began a Monday night vigil, awaiting the birth of Little Ricky, the first Hispanic.

By the time *I Love Lucy* went to divorce court, Desi Arnaz had been replaced on our television screens by Fidel Castro. Castro was a perverted hotblood—he was a cold warrior—as was his Byronic sidekick, Ché. Our fantasy toyed for a time with what lay beneath the beards. When we eventually got a translation, we took fright. *Bad wolf!* Rhetoric too red for our fantasy.

The red wolf ripped away the Copacabana curtain—all the nightclub gaiety of Latin America in old black-and-white movies—to reveal a land of desperate want.

In the early 1960s, Mexican Americans were described by American liberals as an “invisible minority.” Americans nevertheless saw farmworkers in the Central Valley of California singing and praying in Spanish. Americans later saw angry Chicanos on TV imitating the style of black militancy.

By the 1970s, even as millions of Latin Americans came north, seeking their future as capitalists, the Latin Lover faded from America’s imagination.

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Surviving Chicanos (one still meets them) scorn the term Hispanic, in part because it was Richard Nixon who drafted the noun and who made the adjective uniform. Chicanos resist the term, as well, because it reduces the many and complicated stories of the Mexican in America to a mere chapter of a much

larger saga that now includes Hondurans and Peruvians and Cubans. Chicanos resent having to share mythic space with parvenus and numerically lesser immigrant Latin American populations. After all, Mexican Americans number more than seventy percent of the nation’s total Hispanics. And, Chicanos say, borrowing a *tabula rasa* from American Indians, we are not just another “immigrant” population in the United States. We were here before the *Mayflower*. Which is true enough, though “we” and “here” are blurred by imprecision. California was once Mexico, as were other parts of the Southwestern United States. So we were here when here was there. In truth, however, the majority of Mexican Americans, or our ancestors, crossed a border.

One meets Hispanics who refuse Hispanic because of its colonial tooling. Hispanic, they say, places Latin America (once more) under the rubric of Spain. An alternate noun the disaffected prefer is “Latino,” because they imagine the term locates them in the Americas, which the term now does in all revised American dictionaries, because Latinos insist that it does. (What is language other than an agreement, like Greenwich Mean Time?) In fact, Latino commits Latin America to Iberian memory as surely as does Hispanic. And Latino is a Spanish word, thus also paying linguistic obeisance to Spain. For what, after all, does “Latin” refer to, if not the imperial root system?

Hispanicus sui.

My private argument with Latino is no more complicated than my dislike for a dictation of terms. I am Latino against my

will: I write for several newspapers—the *Los Angeles Times* most often—papers that have chosen to warrant “Latino” over “Hispanic” as correct usage. The newspaper’s computer becomes sensitive, not to say jumpy, as regards correct political usage. Every Hispanic the computer busts is digitally repatriated to Latino. As I therefore also become.

In fact, I do have a preference for Hispanic over Latino. To call oneself Hispanic is to admit a relationship to Latin America in English. *Soy* Hispanic is a brown assertion.

Hispanic nativists who, of course, would never call themselves Hispanic, nonetheless have a telling name for their next-door neighbors who are not Hispanic. The word is “Anglo.” Do Irish Americans become Anglos? And do you suppose a Chinese American or an African American is an Anglo? Does the term define a group of Americans by virtue of a linguistic tie to England or by the lack of a tie to Spain? (Come now, think. Did no one in your family take a Spanish course? In high school?) In which case, the more interesting question becomes whether Hispanics who call Anglos Anglo are themselves Anglo?

Nevertheless, in a Texas high school, according to the *Dallas Morning News*, a gang of “Anglos” and a gang of “Hispanics” shed real blood in a nonfictional cafeteria, in imitation of a sixteenth-century sea battle the students doubtlessly never heard of. Who could have guessed that a European rivalry would play itself out several hundred years after Philip’s Armada was sunk by Elizabeth’s navy? And here? No other country in the world has been so confident of its freedom from memory. Yet Americans comically (because unknowingly) assume proxy roles within a centuries-old quarrel of tongues.

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Englande and España divided much of the Americas between them. England gave her colonial territories a remarkable code of civil law, a spectacular literature, a taste for sweeties, and the protean pronoun that ushered in the modern age—“I”—the lodestar for Protestant and capitalist and Hispanic memoirist. Counter-Reformation Spain gave its New World possessions *nosotros*—the cupolic “we”—an assurance of orthodoxy, baroque, fugue, smoke, sunglasses, and a piquant lexicon for miscegenation. Every combination of races is accounted for in New World Spanish. (Except Hispanic.) (Or Latino.)

The numerical rise of the Hispanic in the United States occasioned language skirmishes, especially in those parts of the country where the shadow of Philip’s crown once crossed Elizabeth’s scepter. On the one hand, in the 1960s, Chicano neo-nationalists attempted to make “bilingual education” the cornerstone of their political agenda, since little other than tongue (and not even that oftentimes) united Hispanics. Anglo nativists distributed ballots to establish English as “the official language of the United States.” In truth, America is a more complicated country than either faction dares admit.

Americans do not speak “English.” Even before our rebellion against England, our tongue tasted of Indian—*succotash*, *succotash*, we love to say it; *Mississippi*, we love to spell. We speak American. Our tongue is not something slow and mucous that plods like an oyster through its bed in the sea, afearing of taint or blister. Our tongue sticks out; it is a dog’s tongue, an organ of curiosity and science.

The history of a people—their hungers, weathers, kinships,

humors, erotic salts and pastimes—gets told by turns of phrase. Which is why the best history of the United States I ever read is not a history of battles and presidents and such, but H. L. Mencken's *The American Language*, an epic of nouns and verbs and proverbs; things we pick up or put down by name.

By 1850, William C. Fowler was describing "American dialects." Nine years later, John Russell Bartlett offered a glossary of "words and phrases usually regarded as peculiar to the United States": archaisms, et cetera. The American tongue created what Russell called "negroisms"—cadences, inflections, parodies, refusals. Our lewd tongue partook of everything that washed over it; everything that it washed—even a disreputable history. That is how young Walt Whitman heard America singing in the nineteenth century, heard the varied carols of trade in old New York harbor, heard young fellows, robust, friendly, singing with open mouths.

Nativists who want to declare English the official language of the United States do not understand the omnivorous appetite of the language they wish to protect. Neither do they understand that their protection would harm our tongue. (A restaurant in my neighborhood advertises "Harm on Rye.") Those Americans who would build a fence around American English to forestall the Trojan burrito would turn American into a frightened tongue, a shrinking little oyster tongue, as French has lately become, priested over by the Ancients of the Académie, who fret so about *le weekend*.

In an essay published in *Harper's* of April 1917, an immigrant son, M. E. Ravage, complained about the way Americans lick

the oak leaves and acorns off the old monikers, so that they became "emasculated and devoid of either character or meaning. Mordecai—a name full of romantic association—had been changed to the insipid monosyllable Max. Rebecca—mother of the race—was in America Becky. Samuel had been shorn to Sam, Abraham to Abe, Israel to Izzy."

How Ricardo became rich: When I was new to this tongue I now include myself in, I learned some things that were true about America from its corn, its speed, its disinclination to be tied down, pretty much; its inclination toward shortcuts, abbreviations, sunwise turns. I learned from "hi" and "nope" and "OK." We Americans like the old, rubbed phrases; we like better the newest, sassiest, most abbreviated: Y2K. The most bubbulous American word I learned early on was the unexpected word for one's father (though not mine) and soda and what the weasel goes: pop.

I observed parents laughing over their children's coinages. I inferred the burden and responsibility of each adolescent generation to come up with neat subversions; to reinvent adolescence in a patois inscrutable to adults. The older generation expected it.

But not in my family. My mother and father (with immigrant pragmatism) assumed the American tongue would reinvent their children. Just so did several immigrant Hispanic mothers in Southern California recently remark their children's reluctance to join America. These mothers feared their children were not swimming in the American current—not in the swifts and not in the depths; not even in the pop. They blamed "bilin-

gual education," a leaky boat theorem ostensibly designed to sink into the American current. (In fact, the theorem became a bureaucracy preoccupied with prolonging itself.) These few mothers organized an opposition to bilingual education and eventually they sank the Armada in California. Theirs was an American impulse: to engage the American flow directly and to let their children be taken by it.

But the American current always fears itself going dry—it longs, always, for a wetter wah-wah (there used to be a night club called "King Tut's Wah-Wah Hut"); yearns now to swizzle Latin America in its maw. Spanish is becoming unofficially but truly the second language of the United States. Moreover, Yankee pragmatism accomplishes the romance of the American tongue. By the 1980s, advertising executives in L.A. and Miami were the first to describe the United States as "the fifth-largest Spanish-speaking market in the world." Pragmatism made Spanish the language of cheap labor from fishing villages in Alaska to Chinese restaurants in Georgia to my rooftop here in San Francisco.

Thus does official America now communicate in at least two "voices," like a Tuva singer; three in Eurasian San Francisco. And if it isn't entirely English, it is nevertheless entirely American.

Press ONE, if you wish to continue in English. Pragmatism leads to Spanish signage at government offices, hospitals, parking lots, bus stops, polls. Telephone instructions, prescription instructions, microwave instructions—virtually all instructions in America are in Spanish as well as English.

American politicians, too, begin to brush up their Yanqui-Dudel.

I remain skeptical of the effect pragmatic Spanish might have on the assimilation of Latin American immigrants. Working-class newcomers from Latin America do not suffer the discontinuity that previous generations used to propel themselves into the future tense. But middle-class Americans, friends of mine, composites of friends of mine, of a liberal bent, nice people, OK people, see nothing wrong with bilingual education. In fact, they wish their own children to be bilingual. In fact, they send their kids to French schools. In fact, they ask if I know of a housekeeper who might inadvertently teach their children Spanish while she dusts under the piano.

Nope.

But I marvel at the middle-class American willingness to take Spanish up. Standing in the burrito line in a Chinese neighborhood, I notice how many customers know the chopsticks of Spanish: "carnitas" and "guacamole" and "sí," "gracias," "refritos," and "caliente," and all the rest of what they need to know. And it occurs to me that the Chinese-American couple in front of me, by speaking Spanish, may actually be speaking American English.

On an American Airlines flight to New York, I listen to the recorded bilingual safety instructions. "She" speaks in cheerful, speedo, gum-scented American English. "He" partners her every unlikely event in Spanish; makes tragedy sound a tad less unlikely. (The Latin Lover speaks, I think to myself.)

Some years ago, I stood on a bluff on the San Diego side of

the U.S.–Mexico border, watching Latin American peasants bent double and yet moving rapidly through the dark. I experienced something like the confounding stasis one dislikes in those Escher prints where the white birds fly east as the black birds fly west and the gray birds seem unformed daubs of marzipan. Was I watching the past become the future or the future becoming the past?

Back in the 1960s, Chicano activists referred to the “reconquista” of the United States, by which they meant the Southwest was becoming, again, Spanish-speaking, as it had been in the 1840s (history, therefore, a circle, and not, as America had always insisted, a straight line). Then again I might be watching an advance of the Spanish crown—Latin American peasants as cannon fodder for the advance of King Philip II; spies in cloaks who will insinuate themselves into Anglo households to whisper Ave Marias into baby’s shell-like ear.

Sitting on American Airlines flight 64, I am not so sure. The numbers of Latin American immigrants making their way into the United States more truly honor England. Millions of Latin Americans, my parents among them, have come to the United States because of the enduring failures of Father Spain. Their coming honors England.

Her face painted white, she receives the passenger list into her gem-encrusted hand, but does not look upon it.

The Armada sank, ma’am.

There is glint in her simian eye. Lips recede from tallow teeth to speak:

They are trumped, then, My Lord Admiral.

The airplane shudders down the runway, hoisting sail.

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What did Nixon know? Did he really devise to rid himself of a bunch of spic agitators by officially designating them a minority, entitled to all rights, honors, privileges, and obligations thereto appertaining: rhetorical flatteries, dollars, exploding cigars? (Maybe, by the same token, he could put blacks on notice that they were no longer such a hot ticket.)

A young Bolivian in Portland giggled, oh quite stupidly, at my question, her hand patting her clavicle as if she held a fan. I had asked her whether she had yet become Hispanic. Perhaps she didn’t understand the question.

In *The Next American Nation*, Michael Lind observes that “real Hispanics think of themselves not as generic Hispanics, but as Mexicans, or Puerto Ricans or Cubans or Chileans.” Lind is wrong. Well, he is right in the past tense; he is wrong in the future. You won’t find Hispanics in Latin America (his point)—not in the quickening cities, not in the emasculated villages. You need to come to the United States to meet Hispanics (my point). What Hispanic immigrants learn within the United States is to view themselves in a new way, as belonging to Latin America entire—precisely at the moment they no longer do.

America’s brilliance is a lack of subtlety. Most Americans are soft on geography. We like puzzles with great big pieces, piecrust coasts. And we’re not too fussy about the midlands. But American obliviousness of the specific becomes a gift of prophesy regarding the approaching mass. Our impatience has created the map of the future. Many decades before Germans spoke of the EEC or the French could imagine buying french

fries with Euros, Americans spoke of "Europe" (a cloud bank, the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum, any decorative ormolu, inventing the place in novels and government reports, blurring borders and tongues and currencies and Prussians and Talleyrands into an abstraction, the largest unit, the largest parenthesis that can yet contain onion domes, Gothic spires, windmills, gondolas, bidets, and the *Mona Lisa*).

Many European men, such as the gondolier in Venice, come home from work to eat their noonday meals (according to an American social studies textbook, c. 1959).

Similarly, and for many generations, slaves and the descendants of slaves in America invented a homeland called "Africa"—a land before slave ships, a prelapsarian savanna whereupon the provocatively dressed gazelle could stroll safely after dark. Perhaps someday Africa will exist, in which case it will have been patented by African Americans in the U.S.A. from the example of the American Civil Rights movement. Yes, and lately I have begun to meet people in the United States who call themselves "Asians." A young woman (a Vietnamese immigrant) tells me, for instance, she will only "date Asian." Asians do not exist anywhere in Asia. The lovely brown woman who has cared for my parents, a Mormon born on an island in a turtle-green sea (I've guessed the Philippines or Samoa), will only admit to "Pacific Islander." A true daughter of Nixon.

It is not mere carelessness that makes Americans so careless, it is also that Americans think more about the future than the past. The past is vague to us. Tribal feuds may yet hiss and spit on the stoves of somebody's memory, but we haven't

got time for that. The entry guard at Ellis Island didn't have time for that. The INS official at LAX doesn't have time for that. He is guarding the portal to individualism, the greatest abstraction the world has ever known: *One at a time, one at a time—back up, sir!* Only America could create Hispanics, Asians, Africans, Americans.

The Chinese people are like Americans in many ways. They like to laugh and be happy and play games. (Same American social studies textbook, c. 1959.)

It was only when it came to the landmass extending from Tierra del Fuego to the Aleutians that Americans refused to think in terms of hemispheric or historical mass. America (the noun) became our border against all that lay to the south and north—much to the annoyance of Mexicans, for example, or Canadians. "We are Americans, too," they said. No you're not, you are Mexicans. And you are Canadians. We are Americans®.

Whereas Miss Bolivia, having gotten over herspanic and now surreptitiously refreshing her lip gloss, does, as it turns out, understand my question. She is not Hispanic. Ha ha no. What is she then?

Her eyes flash. I mean, what do you consider yourself to be?
¡*Bolivian!*

Of course, but I protest she is destined for Hispanicity. Because you live in the United States, you see.

¿?

You will know more Colombians and Nicaraguans as friends, fellow religionists, than you would have known had you never

left Bolivia. Spanish-language radio and TV, beamed at immigrants of provincial memory, will parlay soccer scores from an entire hemisphere. You will hear weather reports from Valparaiso to Anchorage borne on a dolphin-headed breeze. Listen, chaste Miss Bolivia: All along the dial, north and south, on Spanish-language radio stations, you can already hear a new, North American Spanish accent—akin to “accentless” California TV English—meant to be decipherable (and inoffensive) alike to Cubans, Mexicans, Dominicans, and blonds like you, because it belongs to none.

Hispanic Spanish is hybrid, uniform. Colorless, yes. I do not deplore it. If I were Miss Bolivia, I might deplore it. One should deplore any loss of unicity in a world that has so little. But I take the bland transparent accent as an anabranch of the American tongue. We bid fond farewell to Miss Bolivia. Who's our next contestant, Johnny?

The Cuban grandfather in Miami, Dick, who persists in mocking Mexicans because we are Indians, less European than he is, the old frog. We've put him in a soundproof booth so his Hispanic grandson can mimic for us the old man's Caribbean Spanish, filigreed as a viceroy's sleeve.

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I think Richard Nixon would not be surprised to hear that some of my Hispanic nieces and nephews have Scottish or German surnames. Nixon intended his Spanish'd noun to fold Hispanics into America. By the time the Sunday supplements would begin writing about the political ascendancy of a His-

panic generation, the American children of that generation would be disappearing into America. But Nixon might be surprised to hear that my oldest nephew, German-surnamed, has a restaurant in Oakland dedicated to classic Mexican cooking; the majority of his customers are not Hispanic.

In generations past, Americans regarded Latin America as an “experiment in democracy,” meaning the brutish innocence of them, the negligent benevolence of us, as defined by the Monroe Doctrine. We installed men with dark glasses to overthrow men with dark glasses.

As a result of Nixon's noun, our relationship to Latin America became less remote. Within our own sovereign borders, crested with eagles, twenty-five million became twenty-seven million Hispanics; became thirty-five million. The Census Bureau began making national predictions: By the year 2040 one in three Americans will declare herself Hispanic. Leaving aside the carbonated empiricism of such predictions, they nevertheless did convince many Americans that Latin America is no longer something “down there,” like an adolescent sexual abstraction. By the reckoning of the U.S. Census Bureau, the United States has become one of the largest Latin American nations in the world.

And every day and every night poor people trample the legal fiction that America controls its own destiny. There is something of inevitability, too, in what I begin hearing in America from businessmen—a hint of Latin American fatalism, a recognition of tragedy that is simply the verso of optimism, but descriptive of the same event: *You can't stop them coming*

becomes *the necessity to develop a Spanish-language ad strategy.*

The mayor of San Diego, speaking to me one morning several years ago about her city's relationship to Tijuana, about the proximity of Tijuana to San Diego, used no future tense—*Here we are*, she said. She used no hand gesture to indicate “they” or “there” or “here.” The mayor's omission of a demonstrative gesture in that instance reminded me of my father's nonchalance. My father never expected to escape tragedy by escaping Mexico, by escaping poverty, by coming to the United States. Nor did he. Such sentiments—the mayor's, my father's—are not, I remind you, the traditional sentiments of an “I” culture, which would formulate the same proximity as “*right up to here.*” For my father, as for the mayor, the border was missing.

In old cowboy movies, the sheriff rode hell-for-leather to capture the desperados before they crossed the Rio Grande. It is an old idea, more Protestant than Anglo-Saxon: that Latin America harbors outlaws.

Some Americans prefer to blame the white-powder trail leading from here to there on the drug lords of Latin America. More Americans are beginning to attribute the rise of drug traffic to American addiction. Tentative proposals to legalize drugs, like tentative proposals to open the border, bow to the inevitable, which is, in either case, the knowledge that there is no border.

The other day I read a survey that reported a majority of Americans believe most Hispanics are in the United States illegally. Maybe. Maybe there is something inherently illegal about all of us who are Hispanics in the United States, gath-

ered under an assumed name, posing as one family. Nixon's categorical confusion brings confusion to all categories.

Once the United States related millions of its citizens into the family Hispanic—which as a legality exists only within U.S. borders—then that relation extends back to our several origins and links them. At which juncture the U.S.A. becomes the place of origin for all Hispanics. The illegal idea now disseminated southward by the U.S. is the idea that all Latin Americans are Hispanic.

The United States has illegally crossed its own border.