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Essay: The Fear of Losing a Culture

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What is culture, after all? The immigrant shrugs. Latin Americans initially come to the U.S. with only the things they need in mind -- not abstractions like culture. They need dollars. They need food. Maybe they need to get out of the way of bullets. Most of us who concern ourselves with Hispanic-American culture, as painters, musicians, writers -- or as sons and daughters -- are the children of immigrants. We have grown up on this side of the border, in the land of Elvis Presley and Thomas Edison. Our lives are prescribed by the mall, by the 7-Eleven, by the Internal Revenue Service. Our imaginations vacillate between an Edenic Latin America, which nevertheless betrayed our parents, and the repellent plate-glass doors of a real American city, which has been good to us.

Hispanic-American culture stands where the past meets the future. The cultural meeting represents not just a Hispanic milestone, not simply a celebration at the crossroads. America transforms into pleasure what it cannot avoid. Hispanic-American culture of the sort that is now in evidence (the teen movie, the rock song) may exist in an hourglass, may in fact be irrelevant. The U.S. Border Patrol works through the night to arrest the flow of illegal immigrants over the border, even as Americans stand patiently in line for La Bamba. While Americans vote to declare, once and for all, that English shall be the official language of the U.S., Madonna starts recording in Spanish.

Before a national TV audience, Rita Moreno tells Geraldo Rivera that her dream as an actress is to play a character rather like herself: "I speak English perfectly well . . . I'm not dying from poverty . . . I want to play that kind of Hispanic woman, which is to say, an American citizen." This is an actress talking; these are show-biz pieties. But Moreno expresses as well a general Hispanic-American predicament. Hispanics want to belong to America without betraying the past. Yet we fear losing ground in any negotiation with America. Our fear, most of all, is of losing our culture.

We come from an expansive, an intimate, culture that has long been judged second-rate by the U.S. Out of pride as much as affection, we are reluctant to give up our

past. Our notoriety in the U.S. has been our resistance to assimilation. The guarded symbol of Hispanic-American culture has been the tongue of flame: Spanish. But the remarkable legacy Hispanics carry from Latin America is not language -- an inflatable skin -- but breath itself, capacity of soul, an inclination to live. The genius of Latin America is the habit of | synthesis. We assimilate.

What Latin America knows is that people create one another when they meet. In the music of Latin America you will hear the litany of bloodlines: the African drum, the German accordion, the cry from the minaret. The U.S. stands as the opposing New World experiment. In North America the Indian and the European stood separate. Whereas Latin America was formed by a Catholic dream of one world, of meltdown conversion, the U.S. was shaped by Protestant individualism. America has believed its national strength derives from separateness, from diversity. The glamour of the U.S. is the Easter promise: you can be born again in your lifetime. You can separate yourself from your past. You can get a divorce, lose weight, touch up your roots.

Immigrants still come for that promise, but the U.S. has wavered in its faith. America is no longer sure that economic strength derives from individualism. And America is no longer sure that there is space enough, sky enough, to sustain the cabin on the prairie. Now, as we near the end of the American Century, two alternative cultures beckon the American imagination: the Asian and the Latin American. Both are highly communal cultures, in contrast to the literalness of American culture. Americans devour what they might otherwise fear to become. Sushi will make them lean, subtle corporate warriors. Combination Plate No. 3, smothered in mestizo gravy, will burn a hole in their hearts.

Latin America offers passion. Latin America has a life -- big clouds, unambiguous themes, tragedy, epic -- that the U.S., for all its quality of life, yearns to have. Latin America offers an undistressed leisure, a crowded kitchen table, even a full sorrow. Such is the urgency of America's need that it reaches right past a fledgling, homegrown Hispanic-American culture for the darker bottle of Mexican beer, for the denser novel of a Latin American master.

For a long time, Hispanics in the U.S. felt hostility. Perhaps because we were preoccupied by nostalgia, we withheld our Latin American gift. We denied the value of assimilation. But as our presence is judged less foreign in America, we will

produce a more generous art, less timid, less parochial. Hispanic Americans do not have a pure Latin American art to offer. Expect bastard themes. Expect winking ironies, comic conclusions. For Hispanics live on this side of the border, where Kraft manufactures Mexican-style Velveeta, and where Jack in the Box serves Fajita Pita. Expect marriage. We will change America even as we will be changed. We will disappear with you into a new miscegenation.

Along and across the border there remain real conflicts, real fears. But the ancient tear separating Europe from itself -- the Catholic Mediterranean from the Protestant north -- may yet heal itself in the New World. For generations, Latin America has been the place, the bed, of a confluence of so many races and cultures that Protestant North America shuddered to imagine it.

The time has come to imagine it.