Paz Americana

Los Angeles, the Vitamin Man and an America at odds with its immigrants

BY JIM HINCH

A December morning in Los Angeles. The air was cool but the sun was warm. I was walking from my house to my car. Green lawns narrowed to the horizon. My phone rang.

"Jim, soy Rodolfo."

"¿Rodolfo? ¿Qué pasa?"

"Jim," Rodolfo said in his erratic blend of Spanish and English. "Jim, hoy vamos al consulado a ver Oscar de la Hoya. El boxeo. El boxeo. He is going to make himself a Mexican. Un verdadero Mexicano. Jim it is necessary that you see this."

I looked up the block and down the block. I barely knew Rodolfo Paz. And what did I know did not add up. For example, Rodolfo never answered his own phone. A young woman answered it, then put me on hold while making a great show of going to find him—even though, as I later learned, it was only the two of them in a very small, very shabby office. Still, in the sprawling kingdom of immigrants that is Los Angeles, it’s not every day that a courtier calls and invites you into his world. And as Rodolfo said, there are some days when it really is necessary that you see this.

"What time?" I asked him.

"Ahora, Jim. Ahora."

The greater Los Angeles built by immigrants is the world’s second-largest Mexican city. It is America’s largest Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, Armenian, Iranian and El Salvadoran city. More immigrants live in the Los Angeles—5.5 million, one sixth of the nation’s entire foreign-born population—than anywhere else in America. Sometime in the past decade, Los Angeles replaced New York as America’s premiere immigrant destination. The Census Bureau’s most recent population estimates show that the number of immigrants living in the New York metropolitan area shrunk by 32,528 between 2000 and 2004—a development prompting a fretful article in The New York Times headlined, “Decline is Seen in Immigration.” Meanwhile, the Los Angeles—Long Beach metropolitan area added 74,034 immigrants during that time. The number of immigrants in Southern California is now larger than the entire population of Manhattan and Brooklyn combined.

When Rodolfo Paz called three years ago to tell me about this Los Angeles, I thought I already understood it. I grew up in it. I worked in it. But I was wrong. I didn’t understand it. Before that December morning, I had spoken to Rodolfo only a few times while writing a newspaper profile of an acquaintance of his, a Honduran radio disc jockey named El Cucuy. Cucuy, whose real name is Rodolfo Carrillo, emigrated to Los Angeles in 1982 and, after sleeping in his car and fathering more children than he can count on two hands, clawed his way to the top of Southern California’s morning drive-time airwaves. His name, Cucuy, means “The Boogeyman.”

Rodolfo told me he liked the profile. But, he said, if I truly wanted to understand immigrants, I needed to dig a little deeper. In particular, I needed to visit those regions of Los Angeles where men like Cucuy are not comic oddities but movers in an immigrant social universe so dense and complete, it sustains its own class hierarchy and its own elaborate relationship to its countries of origin. At the consulate, De La Hoya, born in East Los Angeles to immigrant parents, would announce that, henceforth, Americanized immigrants and their descendents would be eligible to claim Mexican nationality, a large symbolic status raising property ownership in Mexico and, perhaps more importantly, furnishing a Mexican identi-
fication card. De La Hoye was serving as celebrity spokesperson for a Mexican government tourism agency to smooth relations with its far-flung U.S. diaspora, whose remittances annually pump more than $13 bil-

lion into the Mexican economy.

Presented with the prospect of a home-
grown superstar flagging for a foreign government in California city leaders with immigrant wealth, I предлагал as best as Americans to the necessities and complexities of migrant communities. The world Rodolfo wanted to show me was not a flimsy expatriate outpost clinging to the rim of Los Angeles. It was Los Angeles itself, the true city, the center that reach-

es into everything else. As America once again debates the future of its immigrants, opponents have persuaded themselves that the well-staged pieces of propaganda they can put that center loose and roll it away. Perhaps they can. But antagonists on both sides should remember that Los Angeles, too, once nurtured dreams of cultural pu-

ticy. The city’s major era of pre- and post-

World War II growth were all powered by white flight and a determination to evade the ethnic congestion of east coast rivals. That determination failed, and it is now Los Angeles’ turn to fill the role New York played in 1934. The last time Americans seized their borders with well-armed legis-

lation. Then, the Immigration Quota Act targeted Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans. Now, it is men and women like Rodolfo fueling fear. But as Rodolfo taught me that bright December day, America could do worse than become like his city. And it can do better than squander its time trying to banish Los Angeles from its future. For no matter who decides to turn the calendar back to 1924, the kingdom is already here. And, as Rodolfo might say, it really is necessary that you see this.

S

oon after Rodolfo called, I was sitting in his Santa Ana store front-office, star-
ing at myself in a full-length mirror cover-
ing one wall. Finally, a woman who answers the phones—the voice of many, a cordless and two cell phones, which sat on an old desk steel. She was in her late twenties and told me she rides the bus to work for an hour each day from her par-

ents’ house in Buena Park. Somewhere, in

a back room, a radio was tuned loudly to 
Cucuy’s morning show. The secretary and I had a pleasant conversation, shuffling Mr. sleeping, myself. I could see in the

mirror’s reflection what I took to be Rod-

olfo’s office down the hall, a darkened room stuffed with fragrant candles. I knew that Rodolfo used the office for a sideline business, dispensing whatever he called ‘motivational counseling’ to house-

wives whose husbands play too much soc-

cer, find too much beer and pay too little

attention.

Despite his urgency on the phone, Ro-

dolfo was late. He began calling the secre-


tary, who, after putting down whichever phone had run, relayed his apologies. A short time later, he arrived. Tall, trim and dressed in a finely pressed green suit and tie, he clicked into the office building as if he could find that center loose and roll it away. Perhaps they can. But antagonists on both sides should remember that Los Angeles, too, once nurtured dreams of cultural pu-

ticy. The city’s major era of pre- and post-

World War II growth were all powered by white flight and a determination to evade the ethnic congestion of east coast rivals. That determination failed, and it is now Los Angeles’ turn to fill the role New York played in 1934. The last time Americans seized their borders with well-armed legis-

lation. Then, the Immigration Quota Act targeted Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans. Now, it is men and women like Rodolfo fueling fear. But as Rodolfo taught me that bright December day, America could do worse than become like his city. And it can do better than squander its time trying to banish Los Angeles from its future. For no matter who decides to turn the calendar back to 1924, the kingdom is already here. And, as Rodolfo might say, it really is necessary that you see this.

S

oon after Rodolfo called, I was sitting in his Santa Ana store front-office, star-
ing at myself in a full-length mirror cover-
ing one wall. Finally, a woman who answers the phones—the voice of many, a cordless and two cell phones, which sat on an old desk steel. She was in her late twenties and told me she rides the bus to work for an hour each day from her par-

ents’ house in Buena Park. Somewhere, in

a back room, a radio was tuned loudly to 
Cucuy’s morning show. The secretary and I had a pleasant conversation, shuffling Mr. sleeping, myself. I could see in the

mirror’s reflection what I took to be Rod-

olfo’s office down the hall, a darkened room stuffed with fragrant candles. I knew that Rodolfo used the office for a sideline business, dispensing whatever he called ‘motivational counseling’ to house-

wives whose husbands play too much soc-

cer, find too much beer and pay too little

attention.

Despite his urgency on the phone, Ro-

dolfo was late. He began calling the secre-

	nary, who, after putting down whichever phone had run, relayed his apologies. A short time later, he arrived. Tall, trim and dressed in a finely pressed green suit and tie, he clicked into the office building as if he could find that center loose and roll it away. Perhaps they can. But antagonists on both sides should remember that Los Angeles, too, once nurtured dreams of cultural pu-

ticy. The city’s major era of pre- and post-

World War II growth were all powered by white flight and a determination to evade the ethnic congestion of east coast rivals. That determination failed, and it is now Los Angeles’ turn to fill the role New York played in 1934. The last time Americans seized their borders with well-armed legis-

lation. Then, the Immigration Quota Act targeted Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans. Now, it is men and women like Rodolfo fueling fear. But as Rodolfo taught me that bright December day, America could do worse than become like his city. And it can do better than squander its time trying to banish Los Angeles from its future. For no matter who decides to turn the calendar back to 1924, the kingdom is already here. And, as Rodolfo might say, it really is necessary that you see this.

S

oon after Rodolfo called, I was sitting in his Santa Ana store front-office, star-
ing at myself in a full-length mirror cover-
ing one wall. Finally, a woman who answers the phones—the voice of many, a cordless and two cell phones, which sat on an old desk steel. She was in her late twenties and told me she rides the bus to work for an hour each day from her par-

ents’ house in Buena Park. Somewhere, in

a back room, a radio was tuned loudly to 
Cucuy’s morning show. The secretary and I had a pleasant conversation, shuffling Mr. sleeping, myself. I could see in the

mirror’s reflection what I took to be Rod-

olfo’s office down the hall, a darkened room stuffed with fragrant candles. I knew that Rodolfo used the office for a sideline business, dispensing whatever he called ‘motivational counseling’ to house-

wives whose husbands play too much soc-

cer, find too much beer and pay too little

attention.

Despite his urgency on the phone, Ro-

dolfo was late. He began calling the secre-

	nary, who, after putting down whichever phone had run, relayed his apologies. A short time later, he arrived. Tall, trim and dressed in a finely pressed green suit and tie, he clicked into the office building as if he could find that center loose and roll it away. Perhaps they can. But antagonists on both sides should remember that Los Angeles, too, once nurtured dreams of cultural pu-

ticy. The city’s major era of pre- and post-

World War II growth were all powered by white flight and a determination to evade the ethnic congestion of east coast rivals. That determination failed, and it is now Los Angeles’ turn to fill the role New York played in 1934. The last time Americans seized their borders with well-armed legis-

lation. Then, the Immigration Quota Act targeted Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans. Now, it is men and women like Rodolfo fueling fear. But as Rodolfo taught me that bright December day, America could do worse than become like his city. And it can do better than squander its time trying to banish Los Angeles from its future. For no matter who decides to turn the calendar back to 1924, the kingdom is already here. And, as Rodolfo might say, it really is necessary that you see this.

S

oon after Rodolfo called, I was sitting in his Santa Ana store front-office, star-
ing at myself in a full-length mirror cover-
ing one wall. Finally, a woman who answers the phones—the voice of many, a cordless and two cell phones, which sat on an old desk steel. She was in her late twenties and told me she rides the bus to work for an hour each day from her par-

ents’ house in Buena Park. Somewhere, in

a back room, a radio was tuned loudly to 
Cucuy’s morning show. The secretary and I had a pleasant conversation, shuffling Mr. sleeping, myself. I could see in the

mirror’s reflection what I took to be Rod-

olfo’s office down the hall, a darkened room stuffed with fragrant candles. I knew that Rodolfo used the office for a sideline business, dispensing whatever he called ‘motivational counseling’ to house-

wives whose husbands play too much soc-

cer, find too much beer and pay too little

attention.

Despite his urgency on the phone, Ro-

dolfo was late. He began calling the secre-

	nary, who, after putting down whichever phone had run, relayed his apologies. A short time later, he arrived. Tall, trim and dressed in a finely pressed green suit and tie, he clicked into the office building as if he could find that center loose and roll it away. Perhaps they can. But antagonists on both sides should remember that Los Angeles, too, once nurtured dreams of cultural pu-

ticy. The city’s major era of pre- and post-

World War II growth were all powered by white flight and a determination to evade the ethnic congestion of east coast rivals. That determination failed, and it is now Los Angeles’ turn to fill the role New York played in 1934. The last time Americans seized their borders with well-armed legis-

lation. Then, the Immigration Quota Act targeted Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans. Now, it is men and women like Rodolfo fueling fear. But as Rodolfo taught me that bright December day, America could do worse than become like his city. And it can do better than squander its time trying to banish Los Angeles from its future. For no matter who decides to turn the calendar back to 1924, the kingdom is already here. And, as Rodolfo might say, it really is necessary that you see this.
grew eliminated the 1924 immigration quotas. A white-flight housing construction boom demanded cheap labor. Asians engaged in manufacturing with their relatives followed. In 1975, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese. South Vietnamese refugees were sent to Camp Pendleton, a Marine base. South of Orange County, Catholic churches in Orange County ad- opted the refugees. While Los Angeles hosted the Olympics in 1984 and burned its garbage in America’s second city, its tract-home neighborhoods were filling with the kids of those people whose neighborhoods had once been built to evaporate. This start-stop history produced an im- migrant landscape unlike any other. When immigrants arrived in New York City a century ago, they crowded into segregated tenements. L.A. would prevent him from ending up here,” said Monica Varsanyi, a visiting research fellow at the Centers for Comparative Immigration Studies and U.S.-Mexi- can Studies at the University of California, San Diego. But “that tends not to happen. A lot of people tend not to go back… People and their lives are here. That’s where they settle in and make connections and know people and find a place to live and develop their lives. It’s like going someplace for a Vacation and then you end up living there.” In Orange County’s Costa Mesa, the city council recently made national headlines when it considered using local police to crack down on illegal immigrants. But the gesture was too late. The city is one-third foreign-born. Mitsuwa opened a large branch there a few years ago. And topping the list of local attractions is a taqueria on 28th Street called Taco Mosa, which is owned by two brothers from Mexico City who are active in local youth soccer leagues and the Chamber of Commerce.

S
ome I can remember, I was always very proud to have Mexican blood in my veins,” De La Hoyde read from the lectern. The ceremony had turned out to be anticlimactic. It was short, and its main photo opportunity featured De La Hoyde holding up a large mock Mexican identification card that resembled a ceremonial check from the United Way. Cameras clicked. The re- ports lobbied a few questions. Who will you root for in the World Cup, Mexico or the U.S., they asked? Puerto Rico, De La Hoyde replied. Behind him, De La Hoyde’s Riem wife. He confessed he had no plans to move to Mexico. However, he said, he might open some boxing camps there in the future.

A Mariachi band struck up. Quescall- las and wine appeared on a row of tables. King Clave pushed his way through the crowd and whispered something in De La Hoyde’s ear. He returned, his upper lip sweating.

“He said he listens to my music,” he re- ported, beaming.

We drove King Clave back to his hotel, and Rudolfo asked if I minded taking a detour to Alvarado Street to check on his said he had made the trip so many times, he knew the intricate vagaries of traffic on each freeway at almost hour of the day. “I know them better than you, Jim,” he said.

M
uch of the rest of America fears becoming like Los Angeles. “Los An- geles is not America,” said one U.S. senator. But America is becoming like Los Angeles. Even New York is becoming like Los Angeles. Between 1990 and 2000, New York City lost whites and blacks and gained Asians and Latin Americans—like Los Angeles. Of New York’s 2.8 million immi- grants, nearly half are from Asia or Central America. In the last 10 years, the percentage of Hispanic immigrants in the city has tripled. In 2000, the city’s Hispanic population was 1.5 million. But by 2040, it will be 2.2 million. In 2000, about 10% of the city’s population was foreign-born. By 2040, it will be more than 15%.

S
ince I can remember, I was always very proud to have Mexican blood in my veins,” De La Hoyde read from the lectern. The ceremony had turned out to be anticlimactic. It was short, and its main photo opportunity featured De La Hoyde holding up a large mock Mexican identification card that resembled a ceremonial check from the United Way. Cameras clicked. The re- porter lobbed a few questions. Who will you root for in the World Cup, Mexico or the U.S., they asked? Puerto Rico, De La Hoyde replied. Behind him, De La Hoyde’s Riem wife. He confessed he had no plans to move to Mexico. However, he said, he might open some boxing camps there in the future.

A Mariachi band struck up. Quescall- las and wine appeared on a row of tables. King Clave pushed his way through the crowd and whispered something in De La Hoyde’s ear. He returned, his upper lip sweating.

“He said he listens to my music,” he re- ported, beaming.

We drove King Clave back to his hotel, and Rudolfo asked if I minded taking a detour to Alvarado Street to check on his said he had made the trip so many times, he knew the intricate vagaries of traffic on each freeway at almost hour of the day. “I know them better than you, Jim,” he said.

M
uch of the rest of America fears becoming like Los Angeles. “Los An- geles is not America,” said one U.S. senator. But America is becoming like Los Angeles. Even New York is becoming like Los Angeles. Between 1990 and 2000, New York City lost whites and blacks and gained Asians and Latin Americans—like Los Angeles. Of New York’s 2.8 million immi- grants, nearly half are from Asia or Central America. In the last 10 years, the percentage of Hispanic immigrants in the city has tripled. In 2000, the city’s Hispanic population was 1.5 million. But by 2040, it will be 2.2 million. In 2000, about 10% of the city’s population was foreign-born. By 2040, it will be more than 15%.
and sought agricultural, construction and other low-wage jobs in what a recent Pew Hispanic Center report calls "new growth states" in the Southeast, Midwest and Mountain West. Those immigrants are from Latin America and Asia. Suddenly, they are turning up in places like the suburban Milwaukee congressional district represented by Republican Congresswoman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., whose stringent immigration-control measures passed by the House of Representatives in December 2004, kicked off all the debate and the hand-wringing and the protests.

The Census does not tabulate the number of foreign-born residents in congressional districts. But from 1990 to 2000, Sensenbrenner's district lost 79,454 white residents while gaining 2,527 Hispanics and 5,301 Asians. The percentage of whites slipped from 61 percent to just under 50 percent. Across the state, the number of Mexican immigrants tripled. The number of arriving Asians grew by 50 percent.

What happened in Los Angeles will happen in Wisconsin. The number of immigrants will grow and they will change the neighborhoods they live in until native and foreign-born elements merge so seamlessly they are difficult to tell apart. Immigrant social hierarchies will develop—Custay on top, applicants at the consulate on the bottom, Rodolfo climbing in between—and then dissolve into the hierarchies that govern all of American life. Immigrants will man the freeways and learn where to open their businesses. They will buy green trucks and raise steers and hire secretaries to answer their phones. They will make a new America. And one day, retirees born in Wisconsin will be able to name their favorite Vietnamese restaurant, and the mayor always Asian, will plan the Fourth of July parade.

When we returned to Orange County, Rodolfo invited me to dinner at DaVinci, an Italian restaurant owned by a friend near the Santa Ana vanities store. I arrived early and told him I needed to go to my office for a few hours. He said he would meet me at 6 p.m.

The restaurant was in the converted lobby of an old motor-court motel within earshot of the running 55 Freeway. When I arrived early and sat down before an impossibly large centerpiece flower arrangement, the owner noticed me and she allowed only tourists at her motel, no locals. Outside, the parking lot was full of the battered used cars driven by Southern Californians who can't afford a security deposit for an apartment.

Soon Rodolfo arrived, trailing Maria Lolita, a man he introduced as his cousin, and a friend, a bearded man named Jose Luis Rodriguez, who told me he owned the Super Antojitos chain of taquerias. We sat down and the men ordered wine, appetizers, fish, pasta and chicken. DaVinci, it turned out, had just hired a vegetarian from an Italian village to staff its kitchen. The meal included some of the best Italian food I have ever eaten.

Conversation swerved from funeral jokes to farm lore—Rodolfo's cousin, it emerged, was a Jalisco rancher whose pigs, Rodolfo said, were world famous. Maria Lolita and Jose Luis Rodriguez's wife traveled stories from their children's elementary school classrooms.

Finally, the talk turned to cheese, sipping on a glass of port, Rodrigues told the well-told story of Guadalajara's two football clubs—Olas, the rich man's team, and Chivas, the ragged but much-beloved hope of the working man. Rodriguez proclaimed that he could afford Atlas games now. But he said he still preferred Chivas matches, where he bought half whisky at half time and plowed to the front of the crowd when brawls broke out. His stories provoked gales of knowing laughter, and at a nearby table, the restaurant's only other customers, a young couple on a date, joked at their buffet mozzarella and stole curious glances at us.

As dinner moved to dessert and the table grew more reflective, Rodolfo told me that with the money he traded selling vitamins, he planned to build a seven-bedroom house in Guadalajara. No date was set for construction, but he assured me the house would be built some day.

In the meantime, he said that he and Maria Lolita were preparing to host the wife of Guadalajara's mayor at a charity fundraiser in their Irvine home. The event, which featured catered chilequiles from a Supe Antojitos taqueria, was intended to raise money for an orphanage in Michoacan.

As Rodolfo talked, I pictured him climbing the ladder of immigrant Los Angeles, picking his way from Chivas to Atlas. With a combination of movie, persistence, determination and the willingness to spend money when needed to, he had entered Los Angeles' tight but, to him, potent orbit of minor Latin celebrities. Los Angeles is not very thick with such celebrities. Most are in Miami, headquarters of the Latin entertainment industry. The big stars in Los Angeles are local newscasters, radio disc jockeys and musicians who have secured hits on the nation's Mexican Regional radio stations.

Nevertheless, Rodolfo plunged with gusto into the charity fund-raisers, company parties and product-release press conferences that constitute his world. While writing about Cucuy, I attended the release party for his autobiography at the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel. Cucuy posed with stardust and held a thin-laced champagne glass. King Clave dropped by with his retinue. A little man with a lap on my hand to ask if I would please take his picture with the star of his favorite television show. A few weeks later, a nearly identical crowd gathered at the Museum of Television and Radio in Beverly Hills to hear Cucuy announce that he was switching to afternoon broadcasts. (He has since returned to morning.)

The night grew late and I told Rodolfo I needed to go. Jose Luis Rodriguez insisted I stay for one more drink, but I begged off. As I drove home, I thought of Rodolfo's world, this fully articulated social universe forming from my childhood neighborhood that shares its life. I reflected that Los Angeles, where Rodolfo sold vitamins and sent his kids to good schools and dreamed of a house in Mexico he might never build, is no longer an American city. If by American we mean a city that clings to American cultural symbols. It is a palimpsest on which all the world's cities, the alienation of the world's history of urbanity, is written. In parts dense and tall, elsewhere sprawling and low, in some places rich, in most places poor, spreading languages and cultures around like seeds on a vast, dry field. It is an attractive world and a frightening world. But it is not a world that can be undone. And like it or not, it is the world that awaits an America of immigrants.

Patricio's Work

"Living in the moment: Experiencing it all"

BY LINDA YUHAS

Work

A meaningful recipe

A meaningful recipe