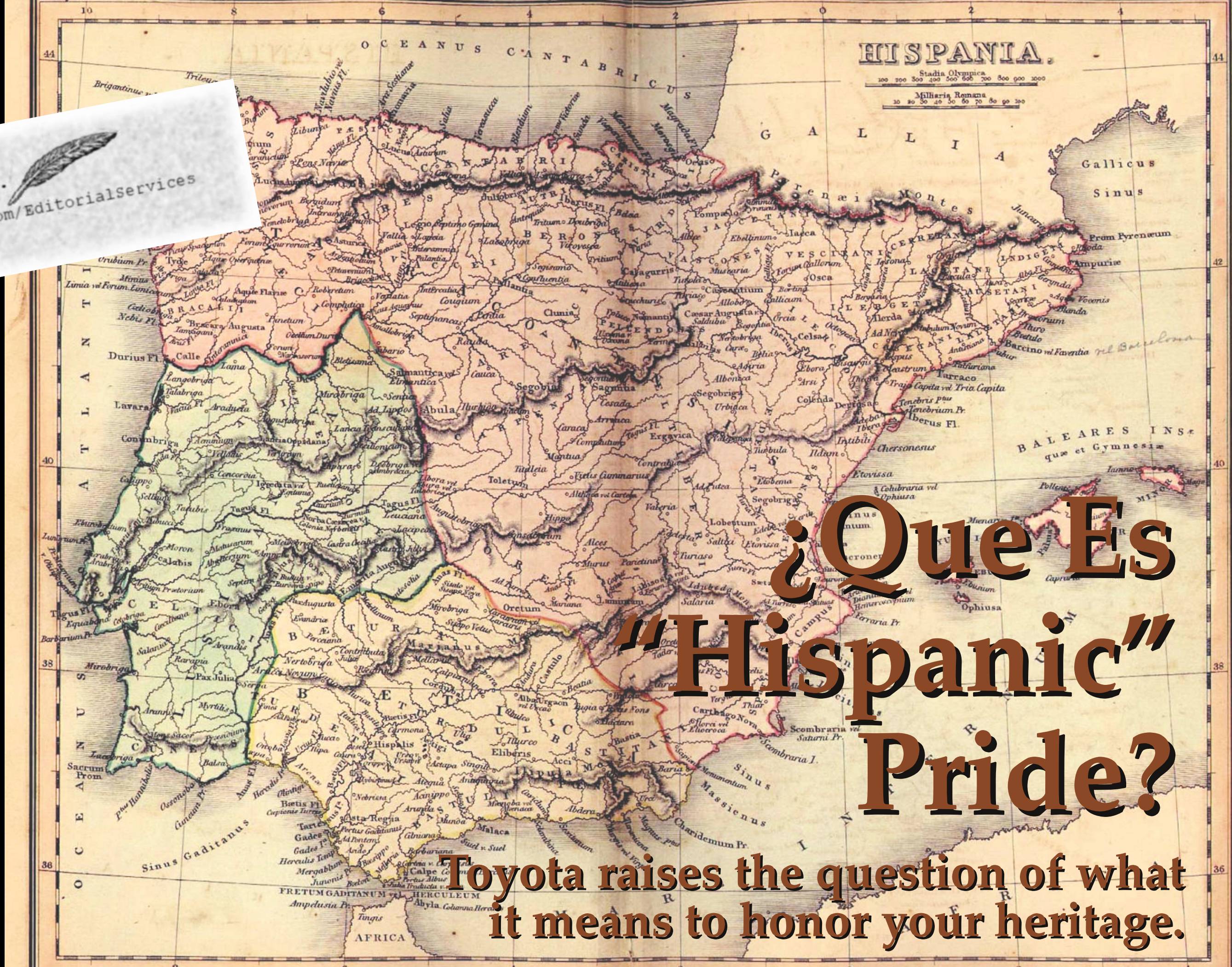


Opinion

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Toyota raises the question of what it means to honor your heritage.



Winter Sunset in New Mexico.

Photograph by Robyn Larson McCarthy.

When I was a kid growing up in Southern California, I never thought much about pride as it relates to ethnicity. I was always taught to be proud of myself and what I had accomplished, to work hard and never expect anyone else to take care of me. Labels like “Hispanic” weren’t part of any equation for success or progress in our household.

If Toyota had launched a Hispanic-pride [car-sticker campaign](#) back then, no one in my family would have paid attention. My grandparents didn’t own a car, and my Dad only bought made-in-the-U.S.A. vehicles. Besides, my parents didn’t care for bumper stickers. “We should never be defined by a label,” Dad always said. “They can be changed too easily. Define yourself.”

Just what is “Hispanic pride” anyway? What exactly are the kingpins at Toyota trying to achieve with this marketing ploy? In fact, I wonder how the cultural gurus at the Torrance, California-based car company even decided which “Hispanic” countries to include. The company’s new Spanish-language Facebook page actually says, “Busca tu país aquí” (look for your country here). Do they realize many of the names listed as countries are actually states in Mexico or cities in South America? “Busca tu lugar de origen” would have been more accurate.

And nowhere on these declarations of pride does the word *orgullo* (pride) appear. So what is the

Hispanic-pride connection?

The word *Hispanic* is no creation of some politically correct wordsmith. It dates back to the Roman Empire, originally denoting a relationship to Hispania, a country located on what is now the Iberian Peninsula. The U.S. government first adopted the word during the Nixon administration, and the U.S. Census has used it since 1980. Due to the popular use of “Latino” in the western portion of the United States, the government adopted this term in 1997 as well and used it in the 2000 census.

Literally speaking though, who are Hispanics? The expansion of the Spanish Empire between 1492 and 1898 brought thousands of Spanish migrants to conquered lands, where they established settlements in places like Albuquerque as far back as the mid-1600s.

My paternal grandmother’s ancestors were among those early settlers, who predated even the British influence in America. However, these Spanish-speaking persons amounted to only a few thousand people when the territory became part of the United States.

Previously, Hispanics were categorized as Spanish-Americans, Spanish-speaking Americans, and Spanish-surnamed Americans. These terms proved misleading or inaccurate. Although many Hispanics do have Spanish ancestry, most today are not of direct (non-Latin American) Spanish descent.

The Spanish *conquistadores* did not settle exclusively in the

John and Dolores Ortiz,
Albuquerque, 1920.



Americas, of course, but in other distant parts of the world, too, producing a mixture of descendants. Today, the term *Hispanic* is typically applied to the varied populations of these places as well.

It's kind of like modern-day kid's soccer. No winners or losers – everyone gets a trophy. If you can spell *Hispanic*, or have acquired a Spanish-sounding last name through marriage, or you bought one on e-Bay, you get a sticker.

When my parents and grandparents moved to California from Albuquerque, it wasn't because the Golden State was giving away free stuff. It was because there was ample work to be found, money to be made, and more opportunities for a better life for their children and grandchildren.

My maternal grandparents managed apartment buildings in West Los Angeles back in the early 1960s. I remember seeing my grandmother washing windows and my grandfather standing on a ladder painting walls in a recently vacated apartment. Grandma collected the rents and did all the bookkeeping and cleaning. Grandpa was the handyman. At Christmastime, he worked every extra hour he had at a local tree farm. The only time he relaxed was on Sunday afternoons, when he'd watch the Dodgers on television or, if the team was home, take the bus to the stadium and buy a seat in the pavilion. And Grandma kept busy cooking,

mending, and making home-made (from scratch!) tortillas.

Come Sunday morning, these hard-working individuals who never took anything for granted or never expected anything from anyone they didn't earn would don their best outfits – he in a suit, she with her gloves and hat – and walk to Mass. They were not rich, they never owned a car, and yet they were so very grateful for all of God's blessings bestowed on them. Now that's something to be proud of.

My paternal grandmother in New Mexico raised four children on her own, the youngest my father. Grandma Reyes worked three jobs to keep her family fed, and she instilled in Dad the values of self-reliance and hard work. When she found out he was smoking as a teenager, she told him, "Just be sure you can pay for them with money you earn honestly." That's when he started working as a caddie at the Albuquerque Country Club, beginning a lifelong love for the game of golf. A love I share.

My heritage is not our family shares from the 17th-century Atrisco Land Grant, handed down from generation to generation. Nor is it the house my parents worked so hard to buy 50-plus years ago, where my mother lived until the day she died. It isn't even all the magnificent turquoise jewelry I inherited from her and my grandmother.

My heritage – and my pride in it – stems from the sum of my character taken from the very best of all my past relatives. It is the blood spilled



Photograph by Luca Galuzzi/www.galuzzi.it

from calloused hands, the pain felt from swollen legs and feet after a long hard day of work... and the happy hearts of grandparents and parents who never considered themselves a “minority.” A school counselor once asked me why I

was opposed to seeking college scholarships earmarked for minorities. My answer: “There’s nothing minor about me.”
Maybe the majority of current “Hispanic” residents descended from those who entered the United

States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries need or want such tags of selfhood. In which case, Toyota will probably run out of stickers.
Madrids have been part of the American melting pot for a long time. I know who I am, where I’ve

gone wrong, what I’ve done right. I also know how to keep moving forward without the need to be pigeonholed by labels, or someone else’s idea of what I should be proud of. I don’t require a free window sticker from a car manufacturer to validate my self-worth. My pride comes from within. No label, of any kind, will ever change that.

Be proud of your ethnicity. It is, after all, from whence you came. But don’t get sucked into believing it’s all you can ever be. Genuine pride in one’s ancestry requires both acknowledging and understanding its legacy – and then creating your own.

Many years ago, Dad was working in the meat department at a market in San Marino, an old-money suburb of Los Angeles. One of his regular customers came in to complain about a cut of meat. Attempting to insult my father, she told him he should “go back to Mexico.” He laughed, then told her he wasn’t from Mexico, he was an American.

She continued to harangue my father, until he finally said with quiet dignity, “I can take you to my great-great grandfather’s grave. Can you take me to yours?” Of course, she replied with annoyance.

“Without leaving the United States of America?” he added. Embarrassed, she smiled and left. Yet she continued to shop there, and treated Dad with a newfound respect that he not only earned, but deserved. Dad pride – now, that’s something to be proud of. And I don’t think Toyota has a bumper sticker for that. **AT**