

Happy To Mix It All Up

For Young America, Old Ethnic Labels No Longer Apply

By Joel Kotkin and Thomas Tseng

Sunday, June 8, 2003; Page B01

LOS ANGELES

Romulo "Tim" Cisneros grew up in an intensely Mexican American family in San Antonio. His brother, Henry, grew up to become the city's first Latino mayor in recent history. Now an architect in Houston, Tim is married to a woman who is also Mexican American. For most of his life he's viewed himself, and his experience as an American, through the prism of his ethnic identity. He's Latino, and proud of it. But Cisneros doesn't expect that his three children will be nearly "as Latino" as he and his wife. In their old tree-lined neighborhood close by Houston's high-rise towers, his kids live and go to school amid a diversity of races -- Anglos, Asians and African Americans as well as Hispanics -- and within a culture that's rapidly transcending old racial barriers and redefining familiar racial themes.

"My daughter listens to hip-hop, belongs to the Asian engineering society and has a crush on a black guy," Cisneros says with bemusement in his office in central Houston. "There's no identification with any group or race."

— Outlook —

- [Mix And Match](#) (The Washington Post, Jun 8, 2003)
- [Answers](#) (The Washington Post, Jun 7, 2003)

FROM Outlook

The Post's opinion and commentary section runs every Sunday.

• [More in Outlook](#)

Free E-mail Newsletters

- **Today's Headlines & Columnists**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)

- **Breaking News Alerts**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)

Welcome to post-ethnic America. You may not have heard much about it yet, since it hasn't fully seeped into the intellectual and political realms that define the national discourse on racial issues. But it's in full bloom on American streets and in the marketplace, changing long-standing notions of ethnicity and race and reshaping interpersonal relationships in a manner that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. On its cutting edge are kids like Cisneros's and their counterparts across the country. No longer content to hew to a single cultural or racial identity, they are beginning to erase the often unbreachable divide that has marked, and marred, race relations in this country from the earliest European settlements. The emerging post-ethnic sensibilities challenge many fondly held assumptions of the political class, the media and, perhaps most of all, certain academic elites, as they contradict the notion that American ethnic and racial divisions are rarely transcended or, conversely, that assimilation -- the old idea of the melting pot -- turns ethnic populations into proto-Episcopalians who eat white bread with cheese spread. As such, they're sure to be unwelcome news to those with a vested interest in perpetuating ethnic divides, as well as to those who champion diversity, or multiculturalism, as a means of assuring a continued ethos of ethnic separation. But cultures will blend in spite of the ambitions of social engineers, and the future belongs to those who embrace it. This is especially true in the new reality of a post-ethnic America, which is about nothing so much as opportunity -- for American citizens, American culture and American business.

Post-ethnicity reflects not only a growing willingness -- and ability -- to cross cultures, but also the evolution of a nation in which personal identity is shaped more by cultural preferences than by skin color or ethnic heritage. To put it in youth terms, you're less likely to be a Latina, an African American or an Asian American, for instance, than a hip-hopper, a *roquero* (rocker), or a pop-culture fan of any color or ethnic background.

Today's young Americans represent the most multiracial group in modern American history. According to Census 2000, 40 percent of people under the age of 25 -- "echo boomers" and younger -- belong to some race or ethnic category other than "non-Hispanic white." Overall, during the 1990s, immigrants and their children were responsible for a remarkable 70 percent of total U.S. population growth. The kind of culture these new Americans are shaping is most evident in those places -- cities such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami and Houston -- where immigrants, and, more importantly, their offspring, are molding street-side realities. The food, the music, even the look of these cities reflect not a single cultural influence, but a plethora of them, and their young citizens dabble freely in the variety.

Second- and third-generation Latinos are the vanguard of these cultural shifts. They constitute the largest and fastest-growing segments of young non-whites in the country, and in many communities across Texas, California and New York, they are the absolute majority of high school students and the overall workforce. If nativists, such as Pat Buchanan, or the cultural nationalists who infest most Chicano studies departments at universities were right, these descendants of Latin American immigrants -- who constitute three-fifths of all Latinos residing in the United States -- would be forthright cultural nationalists themselves, exclusively embracing the Spanish language, music and identity.

But they're not. According to the Pew Hispanic Center/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2002 National Survey of Latinos, most second-generation Latinos are either bilingual (47 percent) or English-dominant (46 percent). Only 7 percent consider themselves Spanish-dominant. The results tilt even more toward English among the third generation, with 22 percent indicating that they are bilingual, and the remaining 78 percent English-dominant. The same patterns hold for media and music. According to the market research firm Cultural Access Group, young Latinos consume English-language television and radio by better than 2

to 1 over Spanish affiliates. Only a tiny minority -- 13 percent in Los Angeles and half that in New York and Miami -- listen primarily to Spanish language music.

So how do these young Latinos identify themselves? In a way not too different from other young Americans. Roughly half, according to the 2000 Census, consider themselves white and, on many critical issues, such as abortion and the war in Iraq, their views are often similar to, or more conservative, than those of their white counterparts. Viewed in this light, Latinos do not fit the mold of a permanently aggrieved minority on America's left. Similarly, their linguistic preferences would seem to challenge the continued viability of programs such as bilingual education, with their emphasis on preserving a distinct culture or "easing" Spanish-speaking youngsters into an English-language mainstream they appear to be diving into headfirst.

Yet another thing is certain: Young Latinos aren't afraid to mix it up personally with other American races and cultural groups. Like Asian Americans, they have shown a strong tendency to intermarry. Roughly 30 percent of second-generation Latinos and Asians now wed people from outside their own racial groups. Mixed-race births in California have grown from 40,000 in 1980 to more than 70,000 annually; one out of every seven babies born in the Golden State in 1997 had parents of different races. This unprecedented mixing alone guarantees the development of an increasingly blended culture, not only for Latinos and Asians in particular but for young Americans as a whole.

Among today's post-ethnic youth, cultural diversity is casually presumed as a normal aspect of daily life, and in the highly fluid youth marketplace, cultural identities are adopted, exchanged and shed as simply and efficiently as if they were eBay transactions. Take music, for example. White suburban kids -- following the reverse crossover example of this generation's most visible iconoclastic rap superstar, Eminem -- make up the majority of the country's so-called "b-boys and b-girls" who purchase (or download) hip-hop music created predominantly by black artists. Meanwhile, creators of this popular art form are themselves increasingly diverse. In Northern California, the underground deejay scene has long been dominated by Filipino "turntablists" who spin hip-hop beats to enthusiastic throngs of club goers of every nationality and color. Or consider the hit films among America's teenagers and twentysomethings. Justin Lin's critically acclaimed "Better Luck Tomorrow" is an independent film released by MTV Films that explores suburban teen angst and violence -- through a cast that's only incidentally all-Asian American. And of course the blockbuster "The Matrix Reloaded" boasts a rainbow cast of all the colors and hues of a post-ethnic America.

Leon Wynter, author of "American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America," notes that these commercial transracial representations sell in the mainstream marketplace. They signify, he states, "a vision of the American dream in which we are liberated from the politics of race to openly embrace any style, cultural trope, or image of beauty that attracts us regardless of its origin."

Of course, we aren't quite there yet. But the new post-ethnic dynamic can be felt even in regions such as the South, where larger numbers of Latinos and Asians are now settling. These newcomers, suggests James Johnson, an African American demographer at the Kenan Institute in Chapel Hill, N.C., are breaking down the traditional black-white split that has so characterized previous race relations in the region. "You are seeing a shift, in the South particularly, into a society that is more the kind of thing you see in Los Angeles and other places," observes Johnson. In the process, he believes, the old racial divides will be replaced by a new, more nuanced view of ethnicity and race.

In many places, this will mean the need to provide immigrants with better access to education and to familiarize the local populace with the history, language and customs of the new Americans. It also will call for a new approach to dealing with "community" issues as many neighborhoods experience constant flux. In communities such as South Central Los Angeles

(now officially rechristened South L.A.), for instance, what was once predominantly an African American enclave is now a majority Latino district. The challenges in addressing the area's problems -- regarding jobs, education and public safety -- go beyond race and are now often spoken of in economic and social terms rather than exclusively ethnic ones. Those who promote exclusively race-based approaches and resist the new ethnic dynamics no longer offer a working strategy for dealing with the problems of such communities.

The post-ethnic reality is also expressed in how people of different ethnicities increasingly live and, yes, shop in America. A generation ago, Americans were warned about becoming a country bifurcated between inner-city minorities and suburban whites. But this is no longer a danger. Today, nearly 51 percent of Asians, 43 percent of Latinos and 32 percent of African Americans live in the suburbs. The immediate suburbs around Denver, for example, experienced a 50 percent increase in their Latino populations during the 1990s.

Suburbanization, with its emphasis on cars, produces a different and more blended kind of "ethnic" economy than traditionally denser urban settlements such as New York's Chinatown. Shopping centers in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, the epitome of an immigrant-oriented suburban area, are likely to be multiethnic, with stores advertising in Russian, Farsi, Armenian and Spanish, as well as the ubiquitous English. The sharpest ethnic entrepreneurs are keyed into this post-ethnicity as a critical part of their business strategy. Andrew Cherng started Panda Express, the 500-restaurant chain, as a small family-run Chinese restaurant in Pasadena nearly 30 years ago. Today, it's the largest Chinese restaurant chain in the country, catering to the broader American public in shopping malls, retail centers and ballparks across 37 different states. Across California, the Asian supermarket chain 99 Ranch Market is finding a growing number of Latinos and whites among its customer base.

To survive and prosper in the future, ethnic businesses -- as well as mainstream American ones -- will need to adjust to the new post-ethnic reality. So will the rest of us, because this is a trend that will only accelerate. In the America of the 21st century, race and ethnicity are sure to be continuously reinterpreted by succeeding generations, confounding the fears and prejudices of their befuddled elders.

Authors' e-mails:

jkotkin@pacbell.net

tdtseng@earthlink.net

Joel Kotkin, a senior fellow with the Davenport Institute for Public Policy at Pepperdine University, is writing a book on the history of cities. Thomas Tseng, a research fellow at the institute, is the principal of New American Dimensions Inc., an ethnic marketing firm based in Los Angeles.