

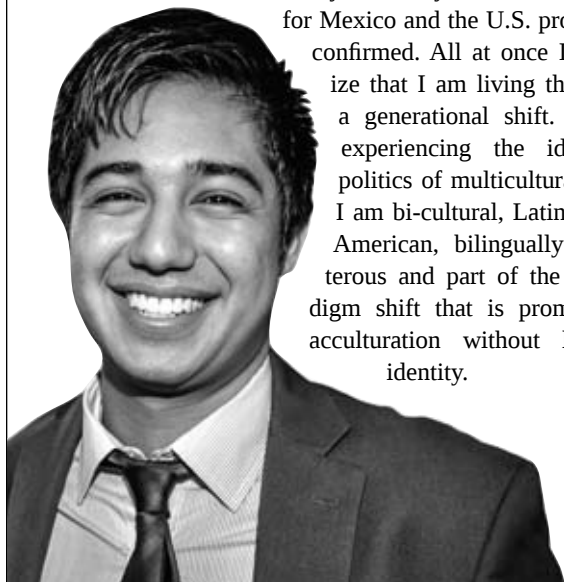
Next Generation American

THE SHIFTING IDENTITY POLITICS OF MULTICULTURALISM

“I really should’ve packed a lunch.” The woman with the tightly wrapped bun on the top of her head is impatiently attempting to explain to me that the information on my birth certificate doesn’t match my mother’s. She hands me back my mom’s quadruple stamped, handwritten, Salvadoran civil war-era birth certificate, which looks as if it had been lost in Wes Anderson’s prop closet. The lady from the consulate continues, “If this is your mother,” pointing at my mom’s birth certificate, “and this is her name, then the name that is printed on your birth certificate, this one, is not her. Right now, we are not able to accept your application until you fix your mother’s name.”

I’d been waiting in the Mexican Consulate’s small, cramped office for a while now and that’s after driving over two hours, all in order to verify my identity and eventually have my dual citizenship

for Mexico and the U.S. properly confirmed. All at once I realize that I am living through a generational shift. I am experiencing the identity politics of multiculturalism. I am bi-cultural, Latino and American, bilingually dexterous and part of the paradigm shift that is promoting acculturation without losing identity.



We are witnessing a generation being put into words by today’s comedians and social activists. They are commenting about the American psyche — a psyche that is having an identity crisis. This crisis is forcing a self examination of what it means to be an American. We are engaging in the relinquishment of the John Wayne cowboy imagery, the 1950s *Mad Men* misogyny and replacing it with our own cultural imaginary that is aware of what divides us and keeps us away from the rest of the world.

I am keenly interested in comedian Louis CK’s stand-up and interview observations because they give me a sense of that “in-between.” He delivers a savvy description of his own experience having been raised in Mexico by his father, speaking Spanish as his first language, and then losing his native tongue while joking about his privilege as a white man in the U.S. He says, “I won’t ever be called that [an immigrant] or treated that way, but it was my experience.” His exploration of identity is what I believe is becoming an American rite of passage.

The “Who am I?” question is being asked by many young Americans. They’ve endured the results of the 20th century’s history of forced assimilation, oppression, political conflict and bloodshed. The idea of this country being a melting pot and having to accept Anglo-conformity is what it meant to be an American. Immigrants were asked to lose and reject their identity in order to survive. I believe that the American psyche wants to acculturate instead of assimilate and value other cultures and honor their contribution to the ideological wealth of this American face.

The many peoples from different regions of the world have always been the true national identity of this country. The “in-between” is this facing of our multicultural

reality. This is the New American Generation looking back at its heritage and the understanding that this country was not built by self-made people, egotistical individualists who claim to never need anybody’s help; Dr. Cornel West puts it this way: “You didn’t give birth to yourself.”

My sense of self is a shifting substance coming from inside of me, simultaneously moving into the future, and at the same time coming from the past cultural heritage of my parents. This is a generation that has the opportunity to be observant, self-aware and to potentially define themselves with the practice of multiculturalism and feminism; they are not ashamed to talk about privilege; not ashamed to speak for social justice causes in all aspects of their life; not afraid to claim their own identity.

This is The New Generation American and they come from immigrant parents, becoming the first in their family to attend college; others are from families with same-sex parents, knowing that they have the capacity to shape society by fearlessly being who they truly are; while others come from parents who have taught them about kindness and fairness so that both daughters and sons believe that they have an equal opportunity to pursue their dreams.

As I leave the Mexican Consulate I get it. We need to get ready for this generation. We will have challenges. I know that we are hardwired to struggle. Yet we are still curious enough to learn from history and work to form common bonds with one another and the world ahead. ■

Qué Pasa is a monthly column featuring the opinions of Lane County’s Hispanic community. Justin Sandoval is a Eugene native and a UO graduate in sociology and Spanish. He currently works as the multicultural outreach coordinator at FOOD for Lane County. Soon he will be moving to Jalisco, Mexico for a year for his next life adventure.




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