



Doing It Our Way

THE WAY LATINOS ASSIMILATE COULD BE CHANGING THE VERY BASIS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AMERICAN. **By Damarys Ocaña**

CYNTHIA IBARRA doesn't know it, but she is a revolutionary.

Like hundreds of other kids in the mostly Caucasian, suburban Northern California town where she was born—and like millions of others across the country—she grew up going to the mall, bowling with friends, playing softball in school and watching blockbusters like *Titanic*. But her first language, the one spoken at home, was Spanish. After school, she would trade her sneakers for ballroom shoes to learn traditional Mexican *ballet folklórico*. And every summer, she and her family would spend six weeks visiting grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins in her parents' native Gómez Palacio, Mexico. "I've never lived my life any other way," she says. "I never thought it was weird or strange. And it doesn't make me less American."

If, right now, you're thinking that

Ibarra's experience hardly qualifies her for Che status, that *your* own childhood was split between, say, NYC and the DR and that *your* words flow seamlessly from English to Spanish and back again, it may be because the bicultural life many of us lead—the blending of Latino and American identities—is now second nature to many. But in fact, the way Latinos are assimilating into American society—on our own terms—is nothing short of groundbreaking.

Sociologists and cultural experts confirm that Latinos, unlike many previous immigrant groups, maintain a dual identity that keeps us closely connected to our roots even as we become mainstream Americans. We're eating turkey and tamales at Thanksgiving, rooting for the L.A. Lakers and the Argentinian Olympic basketball team, celebrating the Fourth of July and Día de los Muertos. With the Pew Hispanic

Center reporting that Latinos are responsible for nearly 50 percent of the U.S. population growth since 2000, and estimates indicating that we'll be nearly one-third of the population by 2050, Latinos have the unique potential to change the American social and cultural landscape—a prospect exhilarating to many and terrifying to others.

"We are facing a dramatic transformation of what it is to be an American, led by Latinos," says Ilan Stavans, author of *The Hispanic Condition: The Power of a People*. "We are a new type of mestizo. Latino immigrants once had an inferiority complex. Mexican immigrants used to say, 'We're not Mexicans, not quite Americans,'" Mexico City-born Stavans says. "But now, we are a new kind of citizen. We don't feel like we have to be one or the other."

Thanks largely to technology, our proximity to Latin America, our

media power and sheer numbers, the days when becoming American meant severing your cultural roots are gone. While the mostly European immigrants who arrived in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries were virtually cut off from their homelands, Latinos live closer to their families' countries of origin and have access to Spanish-language television, radio, newspapers and magazines—not to mention a universe of Web sites. Relatively inexpensive phone calls, e-mails and airfare have made it easy to keep in touch—and practice language and customs. Previous immigrant groups generally came to the States in waves that lasted a decade or two, distancing second and third generations from their forebears' culture, but Latinos continue to immigrate. "When Salvadoreans stop coming," Stavans says, "Nicaraguans come

time Martinez was born two decades later, her parents insisted she learn English first and pick up Spanish on her own. This was easy, thanks to constant contact with fellow Dominicans and other Latinos in the neighborhood. Her siblings would bring home R&B and hip-hop by groups like Naughty by Nature, but "Sunday chores were always punctuated by merengue," Martinez says.

Cultural continuity isn't limited to second-generation kids like Martinez. Think of Eva Longoria Parker, whose family has lived in Texas for nine generations and stills own the original deed to its ranch, which was issued by the government of Spain. Americans don't come more Latino than Longoria Parker, who hosts the ALMA Awards yearly and owns Beso, a new-Latino restaurant.

Biculturalism doesn't sit well with everyone, however. "Many people think that the mission of the founding fathers is being betrayed, that the whole country is going to collapse in 100 years," Stavans says. "But I think it's good."

You can count people like Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, among the scared ones. In his 2008 book, *The New Case Against Immigration, Both Legal and Illegal*, Krikorian argues that immigrants who keep their home countries' traditions pose a threat to national identity and the future of the United States. Others, like former Rep. Tom Tancredo, say that many Latin immigrants who enter the country have no desire to learn English and integrate themselves. Still others believe that there is a full-fledged reconquest happening in the Southwest. As the late political scientist Samuel Huntington suggested in his book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, "Mexican immigration is leading the demographic reconquista of areas Americans took from Mexico by force in the 1830s and 1840s, Mexicanizing them."

They are off-base, says Gregory Rodriguez, immigration and demographics expert and author of *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds: Mexican Immigration and the Future*

of *Race in America*. "The notion that people come from other places and don't adapt to this country is a fallacy," he says, "People adapt in order to better their chances for survival in a new environment. That's always happened."

What's different is Latinos' embracing of multiculturalism. "We have to get rid of this notion that assimilation is learning how to be an Anglo," he says. "The multiculturalism in everyday Latino life teaches us that you can be Dominican and American, you can speak Spanish and be an American."

What that means for the country's future is unclear, say Stavans and Rodriguez. Will the U.S. become bilingual? Will we have a Latino president?

"Clearly, we are going to have a more Latino-infused culture," Rodriguez says. "But then, we've already achieved that. The very Mexican practice of putting shrines on street corners where someone has died, that's all over the country. Does everybody eat Mexican food already? Absolutely. Do Anglo kids in Beverly Hills have piñatas at their birthdays? Yes. The real story is that the fundamental nature of the United States will probably not change. For all the Hispanic inflection into the culture, there is still a remarkable sense of continuity." The latest proof that American society can evolve and remain true to its core values? "That we can have a black president," Rodriguez says.

And it's that very fact—that Barack Obama, whose race, immigrant father and international upbringing made him suspect to some voters and made his election seem unimaginable even a year ago—that gives a Dominican American like Martinez a deep sense of pride in her country, a place that has the ability to accept change and is, for the most part, not afraid to redefine itself.

On Nov. 4 last year, Martinez, then an exchange student in the Czech Republic, sat alone in her dorm room in the wee hours of the morning watching news coverage of the U.S. election returns. As it became clear who the president would be, tears came to her eyes. "At that moment," she says, "I felt American in a way that I never had before."



in, or Guatemalans. And Mexicans continue to come." In the last few decades, 20 million of us have arrived, bringing the total to almost 50 million.

Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age, a new book by a group of noted sociologists, makes it clear that this steady influx allows language, music, food and customs from Latin countries to find new life state-side, even among second-generation kids like Josephine Martinez, 21, who was born and raised in Manhattan.

When Martinez's parents arrived from the Dominican Republic in the '60s, they taught her older siblings Spanish as their first language. By the