

As Much Hamburger as Taco

Third-Generation Mexican Americans

A notable and intriguing feature of race is its ubiquity, its presence in both the smallest and the largest features of social relationships, institutions, and identities.

—Howard Winant, “Race and Race Theory”

Nearly seven million people are third-plus generation Mexican Americans (Macias 2006: 6), yet there is great *diversity* and *fluidity* within this group regarding the way they classify themselves. This chapter analyzes how the contradictory forces of “flexible ethnicity” and “racialization” influence the way third-generation Mexican Americans identify. “Flexible ethnicity” refers to the ability to deftly and effectively navigate different racial terrains and be considered an “insider” in more than one racial or ethnic group. “Racialization,” by contrast, refers to the process of distancing and oppressing people perceived as nonwhite. In this case, other people’s expectations and enforcement of difference create or reproduce social distance and unequal power dynamics. Regardless of whether Mexican Americans experience their racial/ethnic identity to be more “flexible” or “racialized,” they often encounter challenges to their racial “authenticity.”

This chapter is organized in four sections. First, I examine the diversity of racial/ethnic claims third-generation Mexican Americans make. Second, I develop the concept of “flexible ethnicity.” Third, I analyze the process of racialization. Finally, I discuss the issue of racial authenticity and the dynamism of culture, especially with regard to gender.

Variety of Racial and Ethnic Labels

The scholarly literature is undecided about whether to categorize Latinos as a race or an ethnicity. As discussed in chapter 1, whether Latinos have been recog-

nized as a race or ethnic group on the U.S. Census has changed over the decades. Scholars remain divided as to how to classify and discuss this group. Regarding Latinos/Hispanics, scholarly opinions range; this group has been classified as a race (Flores-Gonzales 1999), an ethnic group (as the U.S. Census did in 1980, 1990, and 2000), a “pan-ethnic minority group” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), or even a combination race/ethnicity where no line is drawn (Lee and Bean 2004; Ochoa 2004). Opinion is equally divided about how to classify Mexican Americans. Some scholars regard Mexican Americans as a race (Acuna 2000; Gómez 2007), as did the U.S. Census in 1930 (but never before and never since). Others consider Mexican Americans an ethnic group (Chavez 1992; Jiménez 2004; Macias 2006; Skerry 1993; Smith 2003). Others take a political-historical perspective to argue that Mexican Americans are both a distinct ethnic population *and* a “socially supposed race” when “subjected to policies of discrimination or control” (Montejano 1987: 4–5). Yet other scholars straddle the race or ethnicity question by theorizing Mexican Americans as a “racialized ethnic group” (Golash-Boza 2006; Telles and Ortiz 2009).

In addition to the scholarship being divided on how to classify Latinos and Mexican Americans, there is also much indecision within the group itself (Oboler 1995). This ambivalence is clear in the way my third-generation Mexican American respondents’ racially/ethnically identify. Respondents offered a range of answers from “Chicano,” “Hispanic,” “Latino,” “Mexican,” and “Mexican American” to detailed ratios of their heritage, such as “half-Mexican, half-Italian” or “Mexican/Polish/Swedish/Russian/Jewish.” Third-generation Mexican Americans identify in a wide variety of ways, often using multiple labels and shifting them according to social context.

Marisol Fuentes ruled out several possible choices before deciding upon “Mexican American” as the most fitting identifier. For her, this process began (and continues) through informal personal interactions. One day in high school the issue of racial self-titles was a topic of discussion:

[My teacher] gave us a list of all these different terms, like “Hispanic,” “Latino,” “Chicano,” “Mexican American,” “Mexican” . . . all those words and little definitions [of] what they meant. I remember seeing “Mexican American”: it said something like being born in the United States but still like having Mexican traditions but being more Americanized. I was like, “Okay, I guess that’s me.” Because the other terms were like “Chicano,” people who were involved in the sixties and I’m like, “No.” Then “Mexicans,” people who are from Mexico, and I would say, “Okay, that’s not me.” “Latino”—I don’t know what the heck it said—Latin American or some-

thing. I'm like, "No." "Hispanic," I don't know what it said for Hispanic. The only thing that I found [myself] closest to was Mexican American. That makes sense because . . . I'm Mexican culturally and ethnic-wise. . . . [Yet] I felt like Americanized. . . . A lot of credit . . . towards being American was my dad . . . being in Vietnam. [He served] this country and I feel like I have to give some kind of credit to being American because even though he didn't go voluntarily, he was still drafted. I feel like it's my responsibility in a way to say that I am American because my dad went to fight an American war. I think that has to do with why I started calling myself "Mexican American" and where the "American" came from. Because the "Mexican" I totally knew.

Marisol evaluates the range of identity options to determine the label that makes the most sense to her. She finds that "Mexican American" suits her because it is a middle ground between Mexican and American and honors both identities.

Third-generation Mexican Americans in my sample, who are too young to have been participants in the Chicano Movement but whose parents were alive at the time, had divergent opinions on whether or not they liked the term "Chicano/a." Those in favor of the term thought of it as an empowering self-definition that implied value and dignity. Those who did not like the term considered it low-class or outdated. Caitlyn Benavidas understands "Chicano/a" to be a political label that refers to someone of Mexican descent born in the United States:

I definitely consider myself completely culturally Mexican but Chicano is because I was born here. I . . . politically identify as Chicano and Chicana, like my parents did in politics. My own meaning [of Chicano/a] is mostly being that I was born in the United States and that I have ancestors from the Southwest on both sides of my family. Also just the politicalness behind it—having parents that were part of the [Chicano] Movement.

As one might expect, the children of Chicano Movement activists were more inclined to claim a "Chicano" identity than children of nonactivists. Carmina Dos Santos's parents were active in the Chicano Movement, using their home for Chicano artist and activist meetings:

My parents were always Chicanos. They were active during the Chicano Movement. . . . They are Chicano activists so they raised us [my brother and I] with a strong sense of larger community purpose as connected to

our ethnicity. . . . “Chicana” for me means identity with a larger political purpose. I don’t know if I’m into the Chicano militancy but I think that there is room for holding on to some sort of legacy of the Movement and by claiming that identity I’m in a way committing to continuing that legacy of social activism.

While children of Chicano Movement activists often claimed “Chicano,” many others who are children of nonactivists found that the Chicano label accurately portrayed their ideals of self-representation and anticolonialism. Tyler Mendoza explains his understanding of the various labels that could apply to him:

“Mexicanos” were always people that just got here. But I always grew up knowing that we have these labels: we’re called “Hispanic,” “Latino,” “Mexican American,” “Mexicano.” [Of] all these terms, “Chicano” is the only one that people wanted to be called and fought, struggled, and got beat down to be called. And not only to be called that but have the rights that go with that like everybody else. . . . “Chicano” is a political term. I like that term more than all the other ones first because there was a struggle, there was a Movement. . . . “Latinos,” well, there is something that needs to encompass all of us globally and that is the word that I like best. “Latino” is something that I would choose to encompass all of us, but “Chicano” would be first thing.

Other respondents disliked the term “Chicano.” Gabriel Ponce dislikes “Chicano” because he associates it with racial or ethnic separatism. As a man of Mexican heritage born in the United States, Gabriel resists separatism and hopes to find a way to assimilate more smoothly:

I don’t like “Chicano,” I don’t like that word. Because I feel like . . . you’re really separating yourself when you’re Chicano. . . . I was born in the United States, so for me I’m Mexican born in the United States . . . just a Mexican guy. I’m not a Chicano. I went to a couple of the United Farm Worker marches when I was a baby, but I’m not a Chicano. My parents took us. So, yeah, I don’t really like it. It’s real separatist.

Indeed, the racial politics of the Chicano Movement were premised on rejecting the previous generation’s assimilationist orientation. The Chicano Movement disclaimed whiteness and sought to define Chicanos as mem-

bers of a “brown race,” converting “non-white status into a badge of pride” (Haney Lopez 2003: 2). Interesting, however, was Gabriel’s claim that “I’m Mexican born in the United States . . . just a Mexican guy” because while he declares the United States as his country of birth, his claim of being “a Mexican guy” positions him *outside* of the label “American,” which he does not mention (Murguía and Forman 2003).

Social context is relevant to the way people amplify or downplay their ethnicity. “Situational ethnicity” suggests that actors subjectively evaluate the behavioral options available within a particular objective setting (Okamura 1981). Many third-generation Mexican Americans’ racial self-titles change depending on social context. Carmina Dos Santos reflects,

[At college] in Boston I met a lot of Dominicanos and Puerto Ricanos . . . so I sort of claimed the title “Latina” to be more inclusive. . . . I mean, I think I always switch between “Chicana” and “Latina” and it depends on context. “Chicana” for me means identity with a larger political purpose. “Mexican American” is appropriate when I don’t have the energy to explain and I assume that people wouldn’t understand. I have a hard time with “Hispanic” [because it is a government label and] it doesn’t fit who I think I am.

For Carmina, her racial self-title depends on social context. Her response is typical of many third-generation Mexican Americans in that “Chicano/a” is associated with politics, “Latino/a” is seen as embracing other Latin American people, and “Mexican American” is an easy self-title because people in California are familiar with the term. Reyna Madrigal comments similarly:

REYNA: I say I’m “Chicana.” That is what I identify myself with because I was born here [United States] and from the classes that I have taken I understand that is the correct terminology for myself. Actually, I say I am “Mexican.” But if I’m at the University [where I work in a Chicano Studies Center], I say I’m “Chicana.” I think it depends who I am . . . with because sometimes you get some people that don’t understand “Chicana” and you have to explain to them and they think it’s derogatory. And there are people like my mom’s generation who are like, “Why do you call yourself that? You rebel, you *chola* gang member.” . . . Among my husband’s family [who live in Mexico, I say] I’m “Mexican” so they understand that I am from a Mexican descent. I don’t call myself “Latina.” If people will say, “Oh, you’re Latina,” I’ll just say, “Okay.”

JMV: Why do you not care for “Latina”?

REYNA: [Latino/a refers to] people from Latin America—probably people from South and Central America . . . and I’m not from there.

Reyna illustrates a couple of interesting points. First, she is more apt to call herself “Chicana” in a social environment wherein people have the same definition of the label—one of political resistance rather than low-class or gang-member status. Second, she finds “Latina” ill-fitting because she is not from a Latin American country (conceived of as Central and South American). Other respondents disagree with her precise geography-based use of the word “Latino/a” and see it as a term ready-made for political alliances among people from Latin American countries, broadly conceived.

Mary Waters (1990) found that people often give priority to their surname when making racial-identification decisions. People also frequently reduce their racial or ethnic background to the largest segment, producing “selective forgetting and simplification” (Waters 1990: 25). However, Waters did not consider the pivotal role of geography in people’s identification choices. According to my respondents, proximity to the country of heritage and the demographics of one’s surrounding area affect identification. California’s proximity to Mexico and the immigration streams flowing northward make “Mexican” or “Mexican American” an easily understood label.

Dillon Castillo is half-Mexican, one-quarter Puerto Rican, and one-quarter Nicaraguan, but refers to himself as “Mexican American” because it is a simple answer and “easier” than explaining where Puerto Rico and Nicaragua are located. While this ethnic title eclipses some of Dillon’s other heritages, he is comfortable with it because it is honest and a label that people in California are likely to grasp. Dillon outlined his logic:

I mostly just say I’m “Mexican” because the people I talk to, they wouldn’t understand if I said “Latino” and I’d have to explain Nicaragua and Puerto Rico and Mexican. So usually I just say “Mexican American.” I don’t like using “Hispanic” because my mom says it’s a white guy’s name for the Latinos. Usually I just say I’m “Mexican American” so it’s easy for people. I like one-word answers. I say, “Mexican American” and they’ll be like, “Okay, fine.” If I say “Latino,” then I have to go “Nicaragua”—most people don’t know where that is—then “Puerto Rico,” then “Mexican.”

While Dillon simplifies his racial title, he acknowledges that “Mexican” or “Mexican American” does not entirely capture his background.

Racial categorizations further the myths of race as rooted in biology and of “racial purity.” Racial classification systems force multiracial individuals to self-classify into rigid systems that, furthermore, allow for rank ordering of races. Davina Segura resists being defined by “a box”:

You don’t want to be confined by a box. . . . Because I am Mexican, Puerto Rican, American . . . sometimes I have to check the “other” box [or] put them both. . . . When it says “please circle only one,” I hate that because people aren’t one box.

Third-generation Mexican American respondents exercise discretion as they make racial identification choices. To some extent there is some “flexibility” to the racial claims they can make; yet I argue that these are limited options within a situation of constraint.

*“Flexible Ethnicity” and Living in Two Worlds:
The Privilege and Predicament of Being “White-xican”*

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) theorizes “*mestiza* consciousness,” that is, the consciousness and social location of racially mixed people (especially Native American Indian and European ancestries). Anzaldúa (1987: 79) refers to *mestiza* women as she writes,

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode. . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.

According to Anzaldúa, mixed-race people “juggle cultures” and have “plural personalities.” This nimble and pluralistic identity holds true for my third-generation Mexican American respondents.

Third-generation Mexican Americans live “between” Mexican and American social worlds; yet, they also live “in” one or both social spheres. This “in between-ness” is due in part to later-generation Mexican Americans’ life experiences and the way others perceive and treat them, as well as their physical appearance. Racial liminality is a complicated position: it requires people to do work constructing their identities. For some this leads to crises,

while for others it leads to opportunities. These processes are dynamic, are based on social context, and are reshaped over the lifespan.

Some third-generation Mexican Americans display a “flexible ethnicity.” “Flexible ethnicity” is the ability to navigate two different social worlds—mainstream U.S. culture and a Mexican-oriented community. Extending the concept of “situational ethnicity,” which holds that context matters in the way a person amplifies or downplays his or her ethnicity (Okamura 1981; Root 1996), I maintain that situational constraints limit the reception of one’s potential responses. “Flexible ethnicity” differs from “situational ethnicity” in acknowledging that while people may background or foreground certain identity features in different contexts, there is not a 100 percent correspondence between the way people *want* to be perceived and the way they *are* perceived. “Flexible ethnicity” recognizes that although actors may assert racial/ethnic identities, intended audience may not accept these claims. While flexible ethnicity may be purely “symbolic” (Gans 1979) for some, the terrain of flexible ethnicity is larger in that some people do substantively and meaningfully engage in their Mexican culture. Due to U.S. citizenship, “cultural toolkits” (Swidler 1986), and skill sets that mark the third generation as undeniably American, the majority of this generation is able to play out flexibly their racial background, amplifying or downplaying their heritage. Yet, the volitional aspect of “flexible ethnicity” is limited by the way others perceive, treat, and racially mark third-generation individuals. Julie Bettie’s work (2003) with Mexican American and white high school girls in California underscores that phenotype and surname restrict one’s agency and “ethnic options.” Bettie argues that “one’s race performance was *expected* to correspond to a perceived racial ‘essence,’ marked by color and surname” (Bettie 2003: 85).

Several third-generation Mexican Americans commented on being “in between” Mexican and American social worlds. As Reyna Madrigal commented, “I have no identity. I’m in between. I don’t fit here and I don’t fit in either culture. So I’m looking for something.” While some understood being “in between” as an advantage, for others it precipitated an “identity crisis.”

Samantha Diaz exists in a liminal racial space, neither “Mexican Mexican” nor “American”:

I see myself as Mexican, but a little more whitewashed. I’m part of the generation that is a little lost. Some people consider me not Mexican enough but I’m not American enough. So I’m really stuck in the middle. I don’t categorize myself as Mexican Mexican or American. I’m in the middle.

Samantha considers how she can morph into different social contexts because of her flexible ethnicity and her biculturalism:

When I'm around my Mexican friends, I'm Mexican. When I'm around people at work [Anglo-dominant law office], I'm less Mexican. Honestly, I slip into it when it's convenient. When I have to fit whoever I am around my personality changes.

While Samantha can “fit” a number of different social situations, the voluntary nature of personality or cultural shifts should not be overstated. Her ethnic scripts are limited due to a number of elements, including phenotype and cultural repertoires, two “bumps” in the path of assimilation that steer her course.

Renata Contreras, easily perceived as non-Hispanic white because of her blonde hair and pale skin passed on from her fair Caucasian mother, also makes calculated decisions about her racial claims depending on her social context:

If it's like the Junior League or something like that I . . . probably would put “white” and ignore the Hispanic part. Because I just feel like the people there would judge me: “Oh, a Hispanic, how nice, what diversity” [sticky sweet and sing-song voice]. In high school I played tennis a lot and we'd go to the tennis club in Montecito [high-class neighborhood], I wouldn't highlight the Mexican part. Just because . . . I should be proud of it, but then again, you know how people judge and . . . I don't need that kind of judgment. I don't accentuate it if it's not necessary. In those situations, I'd probably just put “white.” Then “white-slash-Mexican American” probably for job applications or [if] I feel like people really would have an open mind or encourage diversity, like a job application or a random survey. Just so I'm sure that they get a diverse perspective. I'm not just another Caucasian person.

Because of her light, European-looking physical characteristics, Renata is able to “pass” as non-Hispanic white. There are certainly limits to how much Renata can control the way others perceive her. Yet, when considering what racial background to write on forms or aspects of her background to highlight or downplay, Renata weighs the positive and negative consequences of claiming one or both parts of her half-white and half-Mexican American background.

Caitlyn Benavidas also discusses what it feels like to live between cultures:

Definitely as a Chicana I don't feel like I'm part of mainstream culture. . . . Yeah, I'm born here and my family is from here but I don't identify myself as an American above anything else. A lot of it is I'm Chicana, my family is native to this land. We don't necessarily abide to the same kind of identity . . . we don't grasp being American as white Americans do or even immigrant groups do. . . . I feel educationally and language-wise I very much fit into mainstream culture and I'm very much a part of mainstream culture but . . . I don't identify myself with white America.

Caitlyn begins by saying that as a Chicana she is not part of mainstream culture. Then she goes on to delineate how she is a part of mainstream culture in terms of education and language and yet she still stands apart. In essence, Caitlyn is “in” mainstream culture yet she is not “of” mainstream culture. It is unclear whether it is due to external racialization or an internal cultural maintenance sentiment that Caitlyn feels that “as a Chicana” she is set apart from mainstream culture. She reflects on her struggle to delineate her identity:

In high school I was . . . identifying with being Latina outside of school but still had a lot of white friends. . . . [I was] not really like them because I wasn't white. That was a struggle just . . . being different and not really fitting into one group completely. . . . It was a headache. You cry about stuff like, “Who am I and who am I supposed to be and what am I going to do with myself?”

Despite this identity struggle, Caitlyn sees benefits to navigating two social worlds:

I definitely think [my racial background] gave me insight to a lot of different kind of groups of people. . . . I feel like it's definitely been positive because I kind of understand people and the way they think. . . . I know where they get their train of thought. I think it's cool to be able to jump from culture to culture.

Humans are social beings who crave cultural belonging. Caitlyn was unsettled by not knowing where she fit and yet she found some positive elements in being in a diverse environment where she was at times seen as white and at other times seen as Latina.

Carmina and Auscencio Dos Santos, both third generation and children of Chicano activist parents, found flexible ethnicity an advantage as well as a source of identity struggles. Carmina, who has light hair and skin and green eyes, tells me about the privilege of “passing” for non-Hispanic white:

I guess it’s an advantage. I have the privilege of blend[ing] in. . . . I think there are certain privileges to looking not stereotypically Mexican. Things I take for granted like not being followed in a store, not being labeled as somebody who doesn’t have money, you know, all those sort of labels that I think people give to you. So in that sense, I think there are benefits.

The other thing is that . . . because I am so light I see things and I hear things that other people say just assuming that I’m on their side. I’ve also had, “You’re not that kind of Mexican. You’re not like the rest of them.” So, yeah, it gives you so many windows to look into.

Carmina does not experience the “shopowner tailgate” discussed in chapter 5 or the presumption that she is lower class because she does not look “stereotypically Mexican.” She is accorded white privilege due to her pale features, yet this white “insider” status is a double-edged sword as it lets her in on conversations people have when they assume they are in all-white company.

Carmina Dos Santos’s older brother, Auscencio, tells a similar story about living in a “third space” where he is both Mexican *and* American. Auscencio reflects on what it means to be Chicano and “in between”:

It’s really weird: what does it mean to be Chicano? I mean, the basic principles are there: you’re born here . . . you’re first or second generation. You were raised with both—my dad would say, “I’m as much hamburger as I am taco.” Hamburgers and hot dogs; tacos and burritos. You have both of those. It’s being too white for Mexicanos and too Mexicano for the white people. So you’re somewhere in between. You have your own dialect, your own foods.

Being “as much hamburger as taco,” Auscencio figures himself in the middle of a cultural borderland. He is enacting a cultural maintenance lifestyle in that Mexican culture is instrumental and meaningful to him in his everyday life. Nonetheless, like all third-generation Mexican Americans I interviewed, he is also very much American by both birthright and way of life. Auscencio, who goes by Ceño among friends and family, reviews his bicultural, borderland status:

I think it's clear that I'm probably more Americanized than I think I would like to admit. I've got my Internet, got my . . . Just my whole lifestyle is pretty American. But I do feel, at times . . . when I read history books or I see the horrible things that this country has done, I'm like, "Oh, man, I'm so glad I'm not 100 percent American." I don't feel I fit in anywhere. I'm like right in between—and it's okay. Especially here in California. We have our own type of world here. I think my attitude would be very different in somewhere like Nebraska. Or Montana. Your environment dictates who you are, and almost how you act. That's definitely how it is with me. So I guess it almost depends where I am too, because when I was living in El Paso, Texas, . . . I felt much more Mexicano there than I did American. Because I was "Ceño" and my friends were Julio and Oscar. I would go to the store and the woman would swipe my card and say, "Thank you, Mr. Dos Santos" [correct Spanish pronunciation]. I'd be like, "Yeah!" . . . There is something to be said for being completely accepted and understood. I have a really big spot in my heart for El Paso.

This rich passage touches on a number of important themes. First, Ausencio envisions his attachment to Mexico as a way to distance himself from the imperialist history of the United States. Second, he notes the importance of California as his social context: he is among many others who share his in-between status. Third, he describes the "situational ethnicity" (Okamura 1981) he felt when he was residing in a border town in Texas with a large Mexican population and his Mexican identity was endorsed and even reinforced.

Jillian and Andrew Rosenberg, met in chapter 2, also experienced "flexible ethnicity" and identity struggles due to their biculturalism and physical features that are not automatically read as of Mexican origin. Jillian has experienced two extremes of her Mexican identity. It was "dirty" and something to actively estrange herself from when she was younger: "I had really awful stereotypes of what Mexican people were like too, like all Mexican people are gardeners and maids. . . . It was always . . . the half of me that I had to hide. I was always so embarrassed of that; I was soiled in some way because I had Mexican blood in me." Now, in college on the East Coast, she is exoticized by her peers, who are enthusiastically looking for some "uniqueness" to mark them as "not just white." Jillian considers the "identity crisis" that her "flexible ethnicity" produced upon her move to Yale University and her changed social contexts:

It's actually really funny now because going to Yale, it's a total reversal. I'm having a completely new identity crisis. Because suddenly it's cool to be

Mexican, it's exotic, and "I'm of a different race, I'm not just a white kid" [her voice gets breathless and sexualized]. It's a really diverse campus and people definitely put a lot of emphasis on diversity. It's just so funny. Now all the white kids are like, "Oh my god, I wish I were half of something like you are, at least, to make me exotic." I'm like, I never thought of being Mexican as exotic. I always thought it was gross and dirty and lame and not exotic. "Oh, your eyes are so Mexican, they are so exotic and pretty." I'm just like, "What is this? What is happening there?" It's just really interesting seeing that. All of growing up I was trying hard to be white and I was too Mexican and it was bad and now it's like the other Mexican kids there think I'm not Mexican enough because I'm half-white.

Social context significantly bears on one's racialized experience. In her youth in Santa Barbara, California, Jillian was ashamed of her Mexican heritage because she felt it carried negative, lower-class connotations. She then moved to Yale, where she was racially exoticized; this exoticization, which had a sexual aspect to it, became just another way to "other" her and consider her different. While being referred to as an exotic beauty is ostensibly a compliment, these references create social distance that instantiates social divisions and builds dichotomous boundaries of you-me, self-other, normal-abnormal, normal-other.

Andrew Rosenberg also felt pulled between his two racial backgrounds: "I guess just my overall experience with growing up with two completely different backgrounds . . . it's kind of weird. . . . I guess I have always felt pulled between the two. So that was always kind of hard." Jillian's and Andrew's high school had racially segregated classes, as discussed in chapter 6. In addition to their bicultural background, one reason why Jillian and Andrew navigate white settings seamlessly is that they were placed in Advanced Placement classes with white students. Andrew experienced segregated classes: "That's just what I see in the school system: 'Oh, he's Mexican—put him in that class.' . . . It's really bad. . . . They are actually having problems with the high school. People are saying all the Mexicans are just getting put in the lower classes." As half-white and half-Mexican, Andrew struggled in school with his identity and the way he fit into a racially stratified white-and-brown environment:

I guess just my experience in school has been . . . kind of . . . hard. . . . I have been put mostly in GATE classes. . . . It was always "the white kids" and then "the Mexicans." And I was like—what am I supposed to do? You

know? So it's . . . awkward. Because my skin is white. Especially in high school, you know? I hear so many people being like, "Oh, yeah, look at the beaner car." Or, "Oh, the stupid beaners." And I'm like—hey! I just don't really know what to do a lot. . . . I'm starting to see and hear stuff that I didn't think people really would say. . . . So for me, just growing up with two different backgrounds just has been awkward.

While Andrew is already perceived and treated as non-Hispanic white due to his skin tone, last name, and class status, he resists totally "passing" when his Mexican heritage is threatened. In contrast to "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans 1979), in which the stakes to claiming an ethnicity are minimal, Andrew enacts a sort of "sentimental ethnicity" as he defends his marginalized background when it is defamed. In fact, he proactively claims his Mexican background as a way to ward off demeaning aspersions that may be cast against his racial group:

I have always tried to let people know that I was Mexican. I don't really know why I've always done that. I guess maybe it was partly I was afraid they would start making fun of Mexicans and I didn't want to be in that situation. So a lot of times I joke around and be like, "Oh, whatever just because I'm Mexican?" And make jokes like that. . . . It's just . . . scary because you don't really know where you fit in.

Andrew problematizes "passing" and makes racializing conversations difficult for others. Andrew regrets not having many Mexican friends:

I have always regretted that I haven't had as many Mexican friends. I have hung out mostly with white people. And I think it's partly because of the classes that I got put into. It's just kind of . . . disappointing. I guess it's like I don't feel like completely Mexican, you know? I feel just kind of stuck in the middle. . . .

Playing soccer, a sport that draws a lot of participation from Mexicans, was a way for him to meet more Mexican students and "stay in touch with his Mexican side."

While flexible ethnicity carries with it emotional challenges of belonging to two cultures, it can be a source of delight as respondents are "insiders" in multiple communities. This dual insider existence renders both costs (social discomfort, identity crises, witnessing racism, vulnerability to stereotypes,

issues of allegiance) and benefits (fitting into two or more cultures and communities, cultural translation, increased empathy, ethnic representation, ethnic cultural capital). This complex identity, flexible ethnicity, is a hallmark of many third-generation Mexican Americans' lives.

Racialization: Forced and Enforced Racial Identity

"All ethnicities are not equal, all are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary" (Waters 1990: 160). Herbert Gans (1979) put forth the notion of "symbolic ethnicity," the proposition that as acculturation takes place, the new manner of ethnic involvement will revolve around the use of ethnic symbols. This "ethnicity of last resort" will be more "expressive" than "instrumental" in its function in people's lives, more of a leisure activity or "nostalgic allegiance" than a regulatory mechanism (Gans 1979: 9). Gans predicted that symbolic ethnicity would be the dominant form of ethnicity for the third and later generations once they have become upwardly mobile, yet he was theorizing the experience of white European ethnic groups and conceded that his theory might be limited when applied to other racial groups due to dissimilar experiences with racism (Gans 1996: 453, 457).

Mary Waters (1990) also found that white ethnics in America attach symbolically to their ethnic background. White ethnics experience an ethnicity that is voluntary and essentially meaningless in the way it structures their lives, except for ways in which they choose to engage it (language, marital choice, family traditions, passing knowledge onto children). Later-generation white ethnics experience their ethnicity as an "ethnic option" rather than an ascribed characteristic. In contrast to people of European ancestry, racial and ethnic minorities often experience their racial and ethnic identity as not voluntary but imposed (Ochoa 2004).

The "symbolic ethnicity" or "ethnic option" that white ethnics enjoy—they may practice elements of their ethnicity with no detrimental effects—is evidence of white privilege. The experience of racial minorities in the United States is quite different. Various social and political components prohibit racial minorities' ability to experience their ethnic background as individual and voluntary. It is this critical difference between instrumental ethnicity and symbolic ethnicity to which we now turn.

Ongoing immigration from Mexico creates a particular social context for later-generation Mexican Americans in California to negotiate. In a majority minority state like California, intra-ethnic relations are also very influential. At times Mexican Americans sympathize and bond with Mexican immigrants,

and at other times they distinguish and separate themselves from the newcomers (Gutiérrez 1995; Jiménez 2010; Ochoa 2004). A reason for the sense of connectedness is a similarity of place of origin and immigration and acculturation experiences. A motivation for maintaining social distance from the new arrivals is the threat that stereotypes against immigrants will adversely affect Mexican Americans born in the United States. Thomas Macias (2006: 8) writes, “ongoing immigration tends to create a heightened, if distorted, awareness of ethnicity among the population in general, such that prejudice and stereotypes against groups experiencing ongoing immigration are maintained over time.” This collective awareness of Mexican immigration, coupled with the inability of mainstream society to notice differences between immigrants and natives, complicates the situation of Mexican Americans. In many respects, as Mexican immigrants are racialized, so too are Mexican Americans.

Discrimination is a primary way racialization—the enforcement of a non-white racial identity that is devalued and oppressed—is enacted. Perhaps it is easiest to see the process of racialization at work in situations when a Mexican American initially “passes” as non-Hispanic white and is later “outed” as Mexican American. The change in the way people are defined racially often leads to a corresponding change in treatment—loss of jobs, withholding of support or friendships, and withdrawing of resources. For example, recall from chapter 6 the experience of Veronica Guzman, whose blonde, light-skinned sister was treated preferentially by the high school vice principal until she was “discovered” to be Mexican American.

Caitlyn Benavidas similarly experienced racialization when she was “found out” to be Mexican American. While she feels she looks Mexican, Caitlyn often “passes” as non-Hispanic white or Persian. She becomes vulnerable to racialization at the moment when others reinterpret their misreading of her racial identity:

I’ve had some . . . really uncomfortable situations with people thinking that I was not Mexican. . . . I was hired as a waitress by a Jordanian family and they hired me thinking I was Greek or Persian. I started speaking Spanish to the busboys once and they were like, “Why the hell are you speaking Spanish? You can’t be Mexican.” And basically went off on me about how they probably wouldn’t have hired me if they had known I was [Mexican] and that my mom was too beautiful to be Mexican. . . . As flattering as it [is] to be able to float to different groups and for people to think that you might be something else, I start getting offended by it because that’s actually who I am.

The process of racialization occurs here as Caitlyn's Jordanian boss made race-based assumptions about her character, competence, and desirability in the workplace. While some people might want to pass in order to accrue the benefits associated with whiteness, Caitlyn wishes she were darker so that she could avoid treatment based on a racial misperception:

Sometimes I wished I looked maybe a bit more stereotypically Mexican because I don't like that people might treat me differently because they think I'm not. . . . I think a lot of people would rather be fairer skinned because of racism but I wished I was a little bit browner because people think I'm white.

Granted, Caitlyn says this having lived with a flexible ethnicity but, even so, she has clearly been subjected to racialization. Caitlyn dislikes being racially misunderstood because she is proud of her heritage and because she associates darker-skinned people with beauty. Wanting to be darker is a strategic move to avoid uncomfortable situations when people make racist remarks in her presence, taking for granted that she is "one of them."

Jillian Rosenberg also experiences a "magnified moment" of racialization as she reveals her Mexican heritage. In a situation with significant long-term ramifications, a college career counselor told Jillian Rosenberg that the program she was interested in was for minorities only. When she told him that indeed she is Mexican American, he retorted that she would have to "prove" that she is a "real Mexican" on the application. Jillian recounts the conversation:

Another experience I had in college was that I went to speak with a pre-med advisor about my plans and mapping out my courses. He's known for being a really big jerk. People hate him because he tells it like it is and flat up tells you, "You're not going to get into med school," stuff like that. I asked the counselor about a minority program I heard about. "Oh, that's just for minorities."

I said, "Oh, actually I am Mexican."

"Oh, well, if you want to take advantage of that, on applications you are really going to have to prove that, I don't want to sound un-PC [politically correct] here or anything, but you are really going to have to prove that you are a real Mexican."

I was like, "Excuse me?"

"Well, I mean, are you part of any cultural organizations here?"

"No, I don't really agree with a lot of their purposes so I chose not to join them."

"Well, have you gone to cultural events or organized Latino heritage month?"

"No, like I said, I don't really agree with their purposes."

"Well, do you speak Spanish fluently?"

"Actually, it was my first language, but I lost it. I can understand it pretty well, but I don't really speak very well."

"Well, are you taking any Spanish classes at least?"

"No, it doesn't fit into my schedule."

"Well, you are really going to have to do something here to prove that you are a real Mexican."

"I'm sorry, but organizing a cultural dinner does not prove that I am a real Mexican."

That's just who I am. It's just been difficult. Because it is who I am and I'm not going to be able to change that no matter what. I can't make myself more or less Mexican, but at the same time, there is this constant push and pull. . . . I feel like I have to prove it to people. How do I do that? Do I really need to do that? . . . Even though I've come to terms with it within myself, now it's like I have to bring everyone else to terms with it.

The college counselor's effort to racialize Jillian is notable: he challenges her authenticity while simultaneously commanding her to fit into a preconceived and static notion of Mexican American identity.

Racialization can involve assuming on the basis of racial stereotypes that someone has cultural knowledge. Respondents were often expected to have superior knowledge of Spanish due to their Mexican heritage. In their Spanish classes, both Amalia Ruiz and Gabriel Ponce were presumed to be conversant in the language:

AMALIA: I'm not [fluent in Spanish]. In high school . . . I got really pissed off because a teacher asked me a question in second-year Spanish. I just barely passed first-year Spanish. And I didn't know the answer. In front of the whole class he said, "You know, just because you speak Spanish at home doesn't mean that you don't have to study for this class." What?! I felt so angry and humiliated. First of all, I didn't know Spanish so I don't speak it at home! He assumed that I did. And he scolded me in front of the whole class. I legitimately didn't know the answer. And he thought . . . I was just . . . lazy. He thought I was just going to be a lazy Mexican, basically.

GABE: My Spanish teachers in high school were really hard on me because they knew my name was Spanish. I struggled a lot with that 'cause I was always the first guy called on.

Here teachers racialize students as they expect both negative stereotypes and linguistic abilities to be inherent within racial group members.

Another concept that emerged in respondents' narratives is what I call "complimentary othering," yet another form of racialization or racial alienation. Complimentary othering occurs when people consider certain Mexican Americans as "exceptions to the rule," the "rules" in question being racist assumptions of underachievement, intelligence, success, beauty, and so on. In this way, the speaker simultaneously downgrades a group of people on the basis of negative stereotypes while extolling the virtues of a single individual. This backhanded compliment does not consider the *variance* within any group of people. The implicit suggestion of complimentary othering is that the person being complimented does not serve as a positive example of the capabilities of the group but rather needs to be distinguished from the group in order to explain his or her "exceptionalism." "Othering" occurs here despite the individual-level compliment in that the complimented individual is ultimately demeaned on the group level.

Jillian Rosenberg, the Yale undergraduate, provides an example of how "complimentary othering" works:

I do think that people, when they find out that I'm Mexican, [think] that I'm an exception to the rule. I want to try really hard to be a good example and show people that Mexicans aren't just gardeners. I definitely feel like I get written off as, "Oh well, she's not like most Mexicans." . . . I feel like I get written off as an exception. Even if I do do something really great, it's like, "Oh, okay, well, she's not like the rest. Most Mexicans wouldn't be able to do something like that."

If perceived as a racial minority, one is in jeopardy of being saddled with negative stereotypes. Jillian, like many other college-going or college-educated third-generation Mexican Americans, is seen as an "exception to the rule" when she performs well. Complimentary othering is in part based on "ethnic lumping" (Ochoa 2004) wherein nonmembers of the ethnic group fail to differentiate between often economically disadvantaged newcomer Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans who were born and raised in the United States. In the minds of many, "Mexican-origin" equates to "Mexi-

can immigrant.” This conflation obscures the acculturation, upward mobility, and structural integration of later-generation Mexican Americans. Like the model minority stereotype that singles out the successful and discounts racism (Chou and Feagin 2008; O’Brien 2008: 125), complimentary othering is a racist maneuver that lifts only an individual as it castigates the group. Complimentary othering is probably applicable to other subordinated social groups as well.

“Racial/ethnic lumping” often occurs in the wake of political movements (for example, California ballot initiatives such as Propositions 187,¹ 209, 227, and 54), when the effects of a racialized political environment are expanded from one racial/ethnic group to another (such as from Mexican immigrants to Mexican Americans, regardless of generation in the United States, or Latinos more generally) (Ochoa 2004: 143). Perhaps as a response to “racial/ethnic lumping,” “linked fate” suggests that, for racial minority group members, “group interests [serve] as a useful proxy for self-interest” (Dawson 1994: 77). Especially with regard to political action and voting, “linked fate” explicitly links perceptions of self-interest to perceptions of racial group interests.

Racialization, complimentary othering, and ethnic lumping are all experiences of racialization despite assimilation. All third-generation interviewees were college graduates, in college, or in high school and on a college-bound track, showing their structural integration into a U.S. institution crucial for upward mobility. Even given this success, we see mainstream society erecting roadblocks to education, employment, and personal gain—from racist bosses and educators to prejudiced interpersonal interactions. Intergenerational advancement is not sufficient to entirely escape racialization, as contrary to the hopeful tenets of the American Dream as that reality is.

Battle for Authenticity: Identity Struggles in Contested Terrain

Intragroup tension occurs as Mexican Americans (and Mexican immigrants) vie for “authentic” status, a process one respondent referred to as the “super-Chicano” phenomenon. As Julie Bettie (2003: 48) found in her work on Mexican American and white youth, “class and racial/ethnic signifiers are melded together in such a way that ‘authentic’ black, and sometimes brown, identity is imagined as lower-class, urban, and often violent—and male as well.” Central elements of Mexican-origin in-group struggles over authenticity include Spanish language fluency, cultural competency, skin color, class status, clothing, and behavior. These same traits that Mexican immigrants use to critique Mexican Americans for having “lost their culture” (Gutiérrez 1995) are mark-

ers that the majority population can use to single people out for racialization and subjugation. These yardsticks for authenticity constitute “bumps” in the assimilation process that can facilitate, pause, disrupt, or divert progression into mainstream society. Many features that are used for marking and judging as “us” or “them” operate beyond individual will and agency. “Us” can be both Mexican community members and dominant society members, showing that Mexican Americans are appraised by two different contingents. So, despite individual efforts at retaining Mexican cultural elements and/or becoming American, judgment occurs from dual constituencies that accept or reject the plea for membership.

Cultural Toolkit: Spanish Language Fluency

Spanish language competency is a litmus test of one’s degree of association with Mexico (Ochoa 2004). Language is a marker of national boundaries, a type of “cognitive insulation” that nations build in order to cement their identities and demarcate their borders (Cerulo 1995). Fluency in legitimate, national language is a mark of social distinction, a form of capital (Bourdieu 1991: 55). Some Mexican immigrants fluent in Spanish—and not necessarily proficient in English—feel superiority over people of Mexican origin who speak English only. For Mexican Americans who do speak fluent Spanish, linguistic proficiency can be an asset in authenticity contests. Renata Contreras, a light-skinned third-generation woman with blonde hair, explains how her Spanish ability allows her to openly contradict other Mexicans’ assumption that she is a *gringa*, or white girl. Renata describes this intra-ethnic prejudice and her reaction:

From Mexican girls at school: “*Oh, mira, gringa!*” [“Oh, look, white girl!”] That gets me so mad. I would think, “I can speak better Spanish than you!” Maybe [not better than] someone straight from Mexico but a Mexican American. “*Oh, gringa.*” Just not very nice attitudes. . . . They don’t even know. It would make me laugh and then it would make me mad. “Where do you get off?! I probably have more tie to the culture than you do. Just because I look a certain way or hang out with a certain group of people, you can’t just assume.”

As with all respondents who felt they had been unfairly judged by their appearance and were expected to fit a corresponding ethnic profile, Renata invokes the old axiom of “not judging a book by its cover.” While Renata in

a sense won this battle over authenticity, many other people lose this contest and must justify to themselves, if not others, that there is not one single way to be Mexican American.

This struggle was particularly difficult for third-generation Mexican Americans who lacked Spanish language fluency. Even while arguing that limited Spanish skills did not diminish their claims to heritage, these Mexican Americans still felt embarrassed and wounded by attacks from more recent immigrants who asserted that they were not Mexican because they could not speak the language. Samantha Diaz ruminates on Spanish as a barometer for Mexican “authenticity”:

After high school, when I was twenty-one, I went in to the high school and was a color guard instructor. Most of them were Mexican and fluently speaking Spanish. I thought I could connect with these girls and have something in common. And then, I’ll never forget because two girls dropped out and I heard the reason they dropped out was because I wasn’t Mexican enough. Uh-huh. I wasn’t Mexican enough. I didn’t speak Spanish and I was basically a different culture than them. It sticks in my mind [to] this day. *How can I not be Mexican enough?* But, it’s probably my life story. I don’t feel Mexican enough. But I’m not white. I’m just in the middle.

Samantha, like many others, exists in between two worlds and is not fully accepted in either: she is “not Mexican enough” but she is also “not white.” While each person navigates his or her social context differently, pervasive battles over authenticity that Mexican-descent people must negotiate remain a reality.

Personal Traits: Phenotype and Name

While my dark-skinned respondents vociferously complained of the obstacles that their appearance presented, some of my light-skinned respondents noted that they had to fight for “authenticity” and acceptance. While being immediately recognized as Mexican has its hardships, so does being dismissed as not being Mexican. Dillon Castillo, a light-skinned, third-generation seventeen-year-old, tells me that he “feels stronger than he looks.” He wishes he had a darker complexion so that his heritage would be questioned less often. Dillon’s strategy in authenticity fights is to display cultural symbols and accessories that signal what his pale skin does not. Dillon answers my question on how he describes himself racially or ethnically:

I feel stronger than I look. I'm not very dark. So, most people wouldn't assume that I'm Latino. So it's difficult—when I say I am [Latino] to people [they say], “Oh yeah?” They look at me funny. But I have a lot of stuff. My car is kinda low-rider, I had a *zarape* [Mexican blanket] over my seat, I have *la Virgen de Guadalupe* [the Virgin of Guadalupe] on my window. I used to have a little Mexican flag in my room. I'm proud of it. But I don't really look like it, I guess. But I'm very proud.

Since skin color is often (mis)understood to equate with cultural allegiance, Dillon elects to do “cultural work” by displaying cultural symbols that he hopes will make up for his light skin color. If he lacks dark skin, he can at least have “*la Virgen*” in his window. Throughout the skin color spectrum, physical looks have zero correlation with one's sense of culture, identity, or allegiance to Mexico or the United States.

Carmina Dos Santos, a light-skinned woman with light brown hair and green eyes, illustrates how her unintended passing for European-descent white can work against her. People discount her attachment to her heritage because they cannot visually perceive her Mexican background.² In her words, “there are times when people just assume that I'm a sellout because of the color of my skin. . . . So in that sense I think it's a total disadvantage because I often have to prove myself to the community that I belong to.” In contradistinction to Adele and Ruben Mendoza in chapter 5, who were denied housing on the basis of their Spanish surname, Carmina utilizes her Spanish surname in order to authenticate her race:

My freshman year in college . . . I went to a [Latino/a club] meeting in campus and was completely ignored. They just didn't say hello to me. . . . They were saying hello to everybody else and . . . I pretty much sort of snuck away. I was like, forget this, they're not paying attention to me. But the next quarter my dad was invited to come give a poetry reading and I sat in the front row and my dad introduced me and they said, “Well, how come you don't come to our meetings?” And I just looked at them and I said, “I did.” I think [if] they don't know my name or they're not familiar with my parents I think I'm just ignored. . . . I think part of me has learned to not care. When it's to my advantage then I tend to bring my parents' names up. Not so much to use as a crutch but definitely if it works to my advantage.

Carmina's “Dos Santos” surname is often recognized as belonging to a family of Chicano activists and artists, which gains her status and authenticity

cachet. Carmina had mixed feelings about pulling out the last-name card, but it is one way she can combat being misrecognized as non-Latina.

As a consequence of being a light-skinned, green-eyed Mexican American, Carmina would often respond to what she called “micro-aggressions” by retorting about the physical diversity of Mexican Americans. She described “micro-aggressions” as small-scale insults, often with regard to race or gender, that have an injurious and cumulative effect. She provides an example of a brief conversation she had with an anonymous man in an elevator:

“You must be Italian.”

“No.” I went through the whole thing and then I said, “Mexican.”

He said, “You don’t look Mexican.”

And I said, “Really, what do we look like?”

She viewed this exchange as a micro-aggression for two reasons: first, she was incorrectly perceived, and second, her interlocutor had a narrow assumption of what Mexicans look like that rendered her invisible. Carmina makes herself visible by underscoring the physical diversity of Mexicans, broadening the physical definition of Mexican so that it can encompass her. Carmina concludes, “I work hard to hang on to the Mexican part because I think it would be so easy for me to pass.” Renata Contreras, who is similarly light skinned and has blonde hair, finds that she could easily “ignore the Contreras” side of herself and “pass” as non-Hispanic white. Yet, she enjoys her ethnicity: “I don’t want to be the same as everybody else, it’s nice to have a little difference and spice.”

Generation in the United States

Generation in the United States is another yardstick by which racial authenticity gets measured. In her study of the relationship between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants in southern California, Gilda Ochoa (2004) argues that these relationships fall along a “continuum of conflict and solidarity.” My Mexican American respondents reported cultural struggles between themselves and Mexican immigrants. Clearly there are limits to the “flexibility” of ethnicity. Mexican immigrants often claim a superior status because they are more recent arrivals and they are more in tune with Mexican culture than Mexican Americans—who are sometimes derogatorily referred to as “whitewashed” or “*pochos*.”

Although Jillian Rosenberg considers herself both Mexican and American, not everyone willingly grants her entrance into Mexican circles. These

racial gatekeepers, often first-generation Mexican immigrant youth, use generation as a measure of a person's "authenticity":

The other Mexican kids [at Yale] think I'm not Mexican enough because I'm half-white. I've had terrible, terrible interactions with other Mexican students where they find that I'm half-white and they just turn around and walk away. It was unbelievable.

One does not need to be half-Anglo to be treated as a Mexican outcast or imposter. Marisol Fuentes, both of whose parents are second-generation Mexican Americans, is subject to similar scrutiny by Mexican immigrant youth. Marisol, born and reared in San Diego, attended largely Latino schools and seldom experienced racial discrimination from whites. Yet Mexican nationals who crossed the border from Tijuana judged her as insufficiently Mexican and put her in a defensive position. Reflecting on her experience of racial strife in school, Marisol stressed the importance of recognizing the variation within the Latino community. She describes the difference between the Mexican nationals who come from Tijuana, Mexico, and third-generation Mexican Americans such as herself:

In community college we had a lot of people come from across the border to come to school. It wasn't until then that I realized the difference between Mexicans on the U.S. side of the border and the Mexicans on the other side of the border. It was just very different. And it was then when people started telling me, "You're not really Mexican. You don't speak Spanish as well as we do and you don't dress the way we do and you don't talk the way we do and you don't go to the same places and you've never been to Tijuana. . . . We live there, we know what Mexico is like."

This highly personal critique has affected Marisol's identification choices:

It was just very recently that I decided that I'm Mexican American. . . . In high school . . . I would say, "I'm Mexican." It wasn't until community college that I was confronted with those things like, "You're not Mexican." So I didn't know what to call myself. I'm like, "I'm Mexican," and they're like, "No, no you're not."

The social context of San Diego, a border city that is a hub for both immigration and transmigration, is key to Marisol's identification quandaries.

San Diego is a social context wherein Mexican immigrants and third-generation Mexican Americans exist side by side. This close proximity can yield intra-ethnic conflicts regarding both racial “authenticity” and racial self-titles.

Generational differences (i.e., Mexican nationals as compared to third-generation Mexican Americans) actually subsume and stand in for a number of other differences, such as language and socioeconomic status. As discussed above, language is a significant social divider. Marisol considered the differences that “generation” embraces:

I think just language. Language is a big thing. Not knowing perfect Spanish the way they [Mexican nationals] do was always a big put back on me. . . . I was more ashamed of speaking Spanish around them because I didn't know it as well as they did. . . . I felt kind of ashamed that I didn't know Spanish—like I was suppose to know it because I was Mexican and in order to be truly Mexican you had to know Spanish.

Not just language but also socioeconomic status is confounded with generation:

I don't know where they [Mexican nationals] get their money. . . . I don't think their families have money. . . . Other people that I've met do come from the lower [class] of Tijuana, Mexico, and that is why they are coming to school in the United States because they know the education is better.

Marisol sees a parallel between generation in the United States, Spanish language ability, and class status. While her third-generation status has afforded her advantages such as education, English fluency, and middle-class status, it also comes with detractors such as limited Spanish ability that weaken her claim to so-called authentic Mexican identity.

A similarity in generational status can minimize cultural, linguistic, and class arguments. Some respondents felt that fewer authenticity battles occur when they are among other third-generation Mexican Americans. Auscencio Dos Santos commented about the cultural comfort he feels when he is in the company of other Mexican Americans: “There is something to be said for being completely accepted and understood.” Similarly, Ricardo Torres feels most comfortable around other third-generation Mexican Americans. Ricardo explicitly highlights generation in the United States as a key indicator of what facilitates a cultural comfort zone:

RICARDO: Ever since I was little I've been mostly around first-generation Mexicans. I was raised with those kids. . . . Those were the guys that I ran with . . . but there was always a distance, I can't lie. I had a lot of third-generation friends and the third-generation Mexicans were always my best friends. Those were the guys I closely identified with; I went to their houses and their parents were like mine. I really value those friends, when I come to look at it.

JMV: In what ways were your friends' parents like your parents? What made that special?

RICARDO: Because they were Mexican and they felt comfortable speaking English and at the same time we'd be eating *frijoles* [beans], tortillas, all that stuff. There's just kind of a camaraderie, I guess, between more assimilated Chicanos, just because there is not as many. It's like a minority within a minority.

Ricardo feels “camaraderie” with other third-generation “more assimilated Chicanos” who speak English and eat beans and tortillas. In short, those third-generation Mexican Americans occupy a similar space on an assimilation and nationality spectrum as he. While there are “battles of authenticity” that occur among groups of Mexican-origin people—around issues like Spanish fluency or generation in the United States—there is a cultural comfort zone shared by similarly situated Mexican Americans. Little cultural translation is necessary within third-generation Mexican American social networks.

Notions of racial “authenticity,” struggled over by Mexican-origin people along axes of language fluency, phenotype, and generation, *essentialize* what it means to be Mexican American. Third-generation Mexican Americans overwhelmingly argue that there is a wide variety of ways to “be” Mexican American or “enact” that hybrid identity. Mexican nationals often confront Mexican Americans about the validity of their racial identity, suggesting that there are discrete ways to measure and judge this very subjective concept. In response, third-generation Mexican Americans either puzzle over how to “prove” their Mexican culture or, conversely, eschew the challenge to prove themselves and underscore the diversity of Mexican Americans.

Despite the fact that Mexican American identity can be enacted in many ways, select characteristics are reified as essential components of a racial identity. While these measures of authenticity get attention, no particular set of traits can be enshrined as the racial standard. First, race is a social construction, making boundaries both arbitrary and somewhat perme-

able. Second, racial intermarriage in the United States (more so for Latinos and Asians with whites than for blacks with whites) (Feliciano 2001; Qian and Cobas 2004) blurs these racial boundaries. This racial blurring continues with the multiracial children of intermarriages. Third, culture itself is dynamic rather than static; ethnic culture can embrace an array of meanings and practices. The variety of ways available to live out a racial identity belies the essentialist notion that some physical, behavioral, or attitudinal elements are necessary to cause a person to be considered a true or authentic member of a racial group.

Dynamism of Culture: Changing Ideas of Masculinity

Culture is neither monolithic nor static. Currently, third-generation Mexican Americans are debating machismo (patriarchy) and gender norms. While antimachismo sentiments and actions are widely embraced, some remnants of gender traditionalism persist. A post-1970s feminist movement re-reading of gender roles is producing a progressive but incomplete gender revolution. The first step in recognizing social change is to acknowledge the cultural diversity within any social group. The second step is to acknowledge the effect that historical era, social movements, and circumstances have on cultural content.

Gender is one culturally shaped social identity that is adapting to a post-feminist movement United States. Shifts in gender that rupture traditional breadwinner/homemaker gender roles, or “gender flexibility,” can occur due to contracted labor markets and economic pressures (Sherman 2009). Mexican migration to the United States has also been found to facilitate change in traditional Mexican gender norms due to the United States’ relatively more egalitarian gender system (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Smith 2006b). However, it is not just the economically stressed or the migrants who expressed changing views on gender. Financially stable third-generation men and women spoke about their desires and attempts to change patriarchy and rigid gender roles.

A negative consequence of intragroup “battles for authenticity” is that they reify and freeze particular versions and visions of racial identity. Race, class, and cultural repertoire become fused, producing a static notion of the meaning and content of Mexican American identity. Mexican nationals, Mexican Americans, and European-descent Americans engage in this reductionist thinking. While the tendency to essentialize Mexican identity is widespread, there are ways in which Mexican American culture is changing.

Third-generation Mexican Americans possess more progressive gender norms than do their predecessors. Attitudes and actions, including childrearing techniques, motor this shift toward gender egalitarianism. Twenty-eight-year-old Araceli Treviño reflects on raising her two young boys: “I definitely want to push the family aspect and that family is first. . . . You can be making all the money in the world but if I’m not seeing my kids, it’s pointless.” Attached to this “family first” value is also a desire to change the traditional family model by raising boys who have a sensitive side and are not macho. Araceli explains her antimacho parenting style:

It’s tough as a single mom trying to raise your kids strong but at the same time I don’t want them to have the whole macho mentality. And so, it’s hard because you get so many people around saying that “you’re so soft on them. They need to be strong. . . .” But I don’t think there is anything wrong with having a boy that is really sensitive. I get frowned upon from so many Mexican guys that I hang out with. “He’s going to be a sissy or he’s going to be gay.” And I’m like, “Just because he’s sensitive or just because he doesn’t want to tackle you doesn’t necessarily mean gay.” I want them to know that it’s okay to own up to their feelings. It’s okay to cry and it’s okay to be sad. It’s okay to express your feelings. . . . And a lot of the guys that I hang out with can’t stand it. . . . It’s very funny how ignorant people still are . . . they think if they hug a doll they’re going to turn out to be a girl. You kind of look at them and say, “Gosh, that’s so old.”

Araceli was raised in a home where there were different rules for boys and girls—her brothers could go out to parties but she was allowed to cry. She is trying to equalize both opportunities and “feeling rules” (Hochschild 2003) by her androgynous childrearing techniques.

Marisol Fuentes, like Araceli Treviño, is doing her part to drive the dynamism of culture and transcend narrow, static versions of Mexican American gender identities. Marisol considers how she would educate her children to embrace egalitarian gender roles:

MARISOL: There are some traditions that I would probably break with my own children that I went through. Like . . . the whole patriarchal issue . . . like worshipping the man, I guess. I’m totally not going to do that.

JMV: How do you see that enacted in your family?

MARISOL: Just seeing how controlling my dad is, especially to my mom. Just seeing her cry. . . . She just takes it and she cries and my dad can be

an asshole and . . . I don't want that kind of thing. I don't want my kids to be afraid of their father—because I was afraid of my dad for a long time. I want somebody who cannot be afraid to show their emotions. . . . If I do have sons, I'm hoping to teach them that it's okay to show emotions.

We see here again that parenting is a primary avenue through which to change ideologies and practices—in this case, gender dynamics—through time and family generations. While Marisol does not yet have children, she is using her parents' relationship and childrearing styles as a model to actively revise when she becomes a parent.

Gender and age influenced who criticized machismo. Women of all generations I interviewed were outspoken about the need to update and equalize traditional gender norms. While older men did not critique the patriarchal family system that benefited them, younger men often did. Seventeen-year-old Manny Medina disliked the way his paternal grandfather treated his grandmother and witnessed his father change that pattern in his relations with his wife and children. Manny hopes for the eradication of machismo and spoke eloquently about the equality of the sexes:

My parents taught me not to use gender as criteria when judging people or just in the world. In Oakland, too, all my teachers have educated me this way. . . . Females are equal counterparts and in no way should you . . . think that they are inferior to you and less capable.

Another seventeen-year-old, Andrew Rosenberg, remarked, "I don't really agree with—especially in the older generations—the power that most of the males have." Rick Torres, twenty-one, commented, "I don't like *machistas*. I just don't like tyrants, basically. A lot of men push their weight around a lot. They think that they could run the household. . . . That's a stereotype, but that is something that exists."

Auscencio Dos Santos has first-hand experience with a macho father whose hard-handed parenting serves as a negative model to be overturned in the next generation. Auscencio was raised by a father who was "wonderful" in many respects but whose disciplinary tactics he will not repeat:

A lot of times after my dad would hit me he'd be like, "You know, my dad would have given it to me ten times worse. You're lucky. You got off easy." "Yeah, whatever." But it certainly gave me an idea of how I don't want to raise my children. . . . Violence doesn't get you anywhere. It really, really

doesn't. I can see once in a while parents kind of losing it and giving a child a swat. But I think when you are actually angry enough to hold your child down and hit him with something while they're going nuts, you have to be really angry and almost out of control. I don't have that in me. . . . So, I'm hoping to reverse that angry Mexican father trend. It really doesn't have to be that way. . . . I think people respond better to talking.

Again, the third generation's parents serve as a model to either uphold or update as the next generation determines its own parenting strategies.

While an antimacho and antipatriarchal attitude was predominant among the third generation, it was not a unanimous sentiment. While most third-generation women railed against macho Mexican-origin men, some carefully distinguished between domineering and chivalrous qualities. Some women used their natal families as positive examples of how a gendered division of labor in the household was functional, as long as both the husband and wife respected the work of the other. Respect, in addition to men "helping out" in the home, may be the key distinctions between these "transitional" gender roles (Hochschild 1989) and "traditional" gender roles of separate spheres. Caitlyn Benavidas reflects on how her parents worked out a transitional division of labor that was mutually beneficial and respectful:

For people outside of our culture they see the gender roles as being offensive sometimes. Because my mom still, as much of a feminist that she is, she still serves the men in our family first for dinner. She still cleans up after her sons; everything about her is very nurturing. . . . I identify that as being Mexican because that is what I see in my own family. . . . My dad's not sexist—that's just how things go in our family. . . . Coming from outside people have this perception of machismo . . . but it works in our family. . . . I'm sure I'll be guilty of it myself. I'll be cleaning up after my kids. . . . Moms clean and cook, moms put you to bed and I think that might be something that is carried down from a lot of generations of women in our culture. . . .

My dad's definitely very much of a feminist man. He's very progressive and definitely doesn't have the machismo issues, but at the same time he allows my mom to serve him. He helps around the house, he cooks and cleans, he gardens. He does a lot of everything. They are definitely pretty equal but at the same time because of the way that he grew up with his mom making dinner and setting it out for the men in the family, he doesn't mind if my mom does that. He definitely helps her out and he definitely

appreciates her, but to him it's not weird to have a woman serving the man and being the wife and the mom. But they share duties. When I was born my mom worked and my dad stayed home with me a lot so he definitely sees both sides. We call him a feminist.

Caitlyn calls both her mother and father “feminists.” This politicized language of gender equality marks the difference between earlier eras of male dominance and female subservience. Caitlyn is cautious about destabilizing gender roles, yet her parents’ gendered behavior and division of labor are far more egalitarian than the heavy-handed machismo and patriarchy argued against by others. When one analyzes the views of the third generation on gender and machismo, it is important to notice that *changes in gender have already been occurring*. Gender roles and norms are relatively elastic through generations, meaning the definitions of “machismo” or “patriarchy” change with time and generations. A traditionally gendered division of labor is losing ground in the minds and lives of the third generation as the majority favors an equalization of power dynamics between the sexes.

Later-Generation Mexican American Ethnicity

This chapter shows how the popular and scholarly understanding of Mexican Americans as a distinct racialized group *and* an assimilating ethnic group are both right. The experience of flexible ethnicity shows not only that the intensity of ethnicity wanes and becomes more “symbolic” by the third generation but also that racialization prevents the ethnicity of the third generation from being more “expressive” than “instrumental.” This finding limits the generalizability of scholarship on white ethnic immigrants. Mexican Americans have indeed encountered racism that has undermined their acceptance in mainstream U.S. society. We cannot underestimate the costs of non-European ethnicity. While European immigrants faced challenges to integration, these hardships usually abated or disappeared by the third generation. In the case of Mexican Americans, there remains a relatively high degree of racialization that continues for generations after their immigration (Telles and Ortiz 2009). These third-generation Mexican Americans are assimilated in numerous important ways (education, class, language, culture), yet when Mexican American identity is racialized and demeaned, U.S. nativity and cultural fluency do not always equate to first-class citizenship. Ethnicity remains a real issue—not merely a symbolic one—into the third generation.

Another complication of Mexican American ethnicity among the third generation is its inherent hybridity. As we saw in the section on racial and ethnic self-labels, people actively contemplated what “American” meant in comparison to “Mexican.” Even while interviewees themselves drew boundaries around these identities and sometimes reduced them to essentialized core elements, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity, hybridity, and interpenetration of American and Mexican identities. Part of the conundrum respondents faced as they puzzled over self-referential titles—“Mexican,” “American,” “Mexican American,” “Chicano,” “Latino,” “Hispanic,” and others—was the false dichotomy they established of “American” *in contrast to* “Mexican.”

Far from existing as distinct opposites, the cultural spheres of the United States and Mexico are deeply interconnected. In areas of the United States with sizeable Latino presence, this translates to a two-way process of cultural change, a course contrary to the earlier straight-line assimilation forecast of Anglo conformity wherein minority cultures are subsumed under the dominant mainstream culture. As an example of the borders of “American” and “Mexican” being permeable rather than unchanging, consider that salsa is now a more popular condiment than ketchup in the United States (Chavez 2008: 179). An active hybridity that creates a third culture amalgamation means that to be American, with or without Latino ancestry, is to be influenced by Latino culture and to be a Latino in the United States is to also be undeniably American. Mike Davis (2000: 23) envisions this symbiotic cultural exchange and malleability as resulting in “a balanced rise of ‘Latinos *agringados*’ and ‘Gringos *hispanizados*.’”

Even while the meaning of being Mexican in the United States has transmogrified over the generations, many third-generation Mexican Americans find their ethnicity to be more than “symbolic” because it is an influential part of their identity. Some respondents found their “two world” perspective to be an advantage of being biethnic and bicultural. Others, however, were beset with identity crises that were neither positive nor voluntary. Rather than permit Mexican heritage to become background and “symbolic,” society racializes people it can identify as of Mexican origin. This imposed ethnicity has very real consequences for these individuals’ self-esteem, self-perceptions, and educational and career opportunities. These third-generation Mexican Americans who are middle-class and structurally integrated into U.S. occupations, institutions, and mainstream culture live at a racial identification and ethnic culture “crossroads” (Anzaldúa 1987: 195).

The difference between thinned attachment and cultural maintenance individuals is primarily the strength with which they held on to their Mexi-

can culture. Ethnic titles ran the gamut of “Chicano/a,” “Latino/a,” “Mexican,” “Mexican American,” and fractional identities where respondents wrote in “Mexican and _____.” The one notable difference between the thinned attachment and cultural maintenance categories was that the most frequent fill-in response among cultural maintenance individuals (seven out of eighteen) was “Chicano/a,” whereas no one in the thinned attachment group used this label.

All third-generation interviewees possessed a post-civil rights movement language of multiculturalism and equal opportunity. Varying relationships to ethnic culture resulted in different levels of perceptions of social injustices and types of reactions; cultural maintenance individuals were sensitized to racial issues and more likely to take corrective measures. Orientation to one’s ethnic heritage also affects one’s relationship to mainstream culture: people who were thinly attached had a more relaxed and calm connection to mainstream culture because they felt associated with it, whereas those who were resolutely bonded with their ethnic culture were more suspicious of mainstream culture and wary of power dynamics. People on a cultural maintenance pathway were concerned about minority representation in social spaces and institutions such as their schools and workplaces, as well as about overall race relations in the United States. Anxiety over power politics and equal representation was not the exclusive domain of highly identified Mexican Americans, however, but rather was a point of concern for most third-generation respondents who were reared in a time that (at least overtly) heralded the benefits of multiculturalism, especially in the majority minority state of California. Additionally, most parents had tales of unequal treatment with which their children were familiar, so a sense of family legacy of inequality or blocked opportunity made most third-generation Mexican Americans attentive to American race relations. Given that thinned attachment and cultural maintenance are ideal types, these endpoints embrace the myriad perspectives, ways of life, and integration possibilities that people can possess and enact.

Later-generation Mexican Americans exist in a double bind. They do not necessarily seamlessly fit into the U.S. mainstream, yet they also do not necessarily find camaraderie among other Mexican-origin groups. Static and dichotomous visions of “American” and “Mexican” have only hindered race relations and integration processes. As Gilda Ochoa (2004: 223) notes, “historical and contemporary factors . . . have fostered narrow, binary, and static conceptualizations of Americanness and Mexicanness.” Rather than acknowledge the vast intragroup heterogeneity of Mexican Americans, some people insist on being “‘self-appointed gatekeepers’ who exclude those indi-

viduals who do not possess some socially constructed benchmark of Mexicaness, such as fluency in the Spanish language” (Barrera 1991: 83). Instead of building walls based on the sufficiency or deficiency of one’s “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986)—such as Spanish language ability—we need to recognize the variety within the Mexican American population.

Some third-generation individuals had phenotypic features that did get recognized as “Latino.” Others perceive them as racially ambiguous and difficult to classify. In this way, third-generation Mexican Americans can traverse multiple racial terrains with equal dexterity. While racial ascriptions remain key in defining (and defending) racial boundaries, some third-generation Mexican Americans who are either part European descent or have lighter skin and hair color find it easier to “pass,” or be considered non-Hispanic white.

While flexible ethnicity affords individuals room to negotiate their racial identity, this is not an agent-centered process or state of being. Flexible ethnicity posits that a variety of ethnic scripts is available to actors within a situation of institutional and cultural constraint. Flexible ethnicity allows for a number of forms of racial identification. They include passing as European-descent white, being “Mexican American, light on the ‘Mexican,’” an “American with some spice,” “Mexican American yet I wish I was darker,” and “American by birth, Mexican by culture.” By the U.S.-born third generation, racial descriptors ran the gamut of “American” options, from “with some spice” or “Mexican by culture,” to emphasize ethnic distinction, to “light on the ‘Mexican,’” to reduce dissimilarity from American mainstream. As the third generation develops into its own racial generation, bifurcated as it is, it is crafting its own set of racialized identities. These racial identities respond to impinging institutional messages, cultural framings, family teachings, and the sociopolitical milieu. As the third generation lives out, or even expands, its flexible ethnicity, it paves the way for revised race relations in the United States. Yet acceptance by the mainstream is forestalled by continuing racialization that is based on phenotype, name, class, and essentialized (and assumed) cultural behaviors. For U.S.-born Americans of Mexican descent, facing an enforced and subjugated racial status that prohibits a first-class identity is especially challenging because they are not recognized as the Americans that they truly are.