

REINVENTING THE MELTING POT

The New Immigrants and
What It Means To Be American
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INTRODUCTION

Like many Asian-Americans of his generation, Eddie Liu {FN1} isn't quite sure how to place or describe himself. Born in Taiwan to professional parents who moved to the United States when he was two years old, Eddie grew up in a California suburb, speaking mostly English and absorbing the manners and morals he saw on television, hardly aware of any differences between himself and his mostly Anglo school friends. Going to college changed all that: by the mid-1990s, identity politics had taken over his University of California campus, and Eddie quickly learned to see himself as an Asian-American. He took courses in Asian-American studies, joined several Chinese-American organizations, decided he could date only Asian women and grew more and more skeptical about the United States—the typical trajectory of a young, hyphenated American in the age of multiculturalism.

By the time I met him, he was twenty-five, and his life reflected both of these younger selves. He lived in a comfortable Los Angeles suburb, drove an expensive late-model car, dated both Asian and white women and, though he worked for an internet company that targeted Asian-Americans, knew more about American popular culture than I did. A bright and engaging young man, he grew thoughtful and a little tentative when our conversation turned to ethnic identity. Asked whether he saw himself as an excluded minority or a “person of color,” he laughed good-naturedly. “Hardly,” he said. And yet, when asked about the word “assimilation,” he was plainly uncomfortable. “I don't know,” he mused, “not if it's a one-way street. Not if you're asking me to give up who I am and fit into some 1950s ‘Leave It To Beaver’ America. Of course, I'm American. But I'm not sure I'm assimilated—or want to be.”

Eddie's ambivalence is far from unique. Like most immigrants in the past, the overwhelming majority of today's brand-new arrivals know why they have come to the United States: to make a better life for themselves and their children by becoming American. These newcomers struggle against all odds to fit in, finding jobs, learning the system, picking up the rudiments of the language. And with the exception of a few community leaders who draw their status and livelihood from their separate ethnicity, first-generation immigrants have no trouble with the word “assimilation.” “I don't see why people would not want to assimilate,” a Chinese-American said to me recently with a certainty typical of those born in another country.

But the second generation, be it Asian or Latino or some other group, is often far less clear about its relationship to the new place. Like Eddie, they know what they don't want. None seek to lose themselves and their cultural heritage in a bland, homogenized America—assimilation as defined by the conformist, lily-white suburban neighborhoods of 1950s television and advertising. Multiculturalism combined with the sheer number of newcomers arriving today has laid that

dream—if it ever really was anyone’s dream—to rest forever. But nor do most voice the oppositional attitudes and color-coded divisiveness associated with identity politics. They are keen to make it in America, yet reject the metaphor of the melting pot—and desperately need a way to understand just who they are and how they fit it.

American demographic realities only highlight the significance of the questions they face. One in nine Americans is now foreign-born, and together blacks, Hispanics and Asians account for 30 percent of the population. The new immigrant groups are by far the fastest growing segments of the nation, with Latinos already the largest minority. A lion’s share of these newcomers have settled in a few cities and states: Hispanics make up nearly one-third of the people in both California and Texas, for example, almost half in Los Angeles and two-thirds in Miami. But significant numbers of immigrants are also moving to other parts of the country, and dilemma’s such as Eddie Liu’s will soon have consequences for every region.

Will the melting pot work for the new immigrants arriving today? What’s at issue is partly pragmatic: whether the newcomers will succeed economically the way millions of immigrants before them succeeded, learning English, taking advantage of opportunity and moving up the ladder into the middle class. But the question also has another dimension, at least as important: Will they “become American,” loyal to the ideals and habits and values that have historically held the nation together? And for that to happen, we may need a new definition, or new understanding of assimilation—a definition that makes sense today, in an era of globalization, the internet, identity politics, niche advertising and a TV dial that offers a choice among a hundred or more different channels.

Even as they live out the melting pot myth, today’s immigrants and their children are searching for new ways to think and talk about it, and together, they and the rest of the nation face the challenge of updating the traditional ideal. This rethinking need not be destructive. On the contrary, it could ultimately strengthen one of our most hallowed tenets. The ferment is already taking place—in immigrant neighborhoods, on university campuses, in the media, among scholars and social critics. The essays that follow reflect and crystallize that important debate. Just what kind of assimilation is taking place today? What is possible? What is desirable? And how can we reframe the melting-pot vision to make it work for a cosmopolitan, twenty-first century America?

Making It Into the Mainstream—As Hard If Not Harder Than Ever

The story of immigrant absorption is as old as America, but the new arrivals and the country they are settling in are very different today than in the past. Yesterday’s newcomers were ethnically more similar to the nation they were joining: like the native born, virtually all were of European stock. In contrast, today, most immigrants hail from the developing world, more than half of them from Latin-American and a quarter from Asia. Today’s newcomers include skilled, middle-class people, but many are poor and uneducated and woefully unprepared to join the knowledge economy. (Some 60 percent of those from India, for example, have completed four years of college, but only 6 percent of refugees from Cambodia have, and the average Mexican arrives with 7.6 years of schooling.) Together, immigrants and their children account for more than 60

million people, or a fifth of all U.S. residents. And by 2050, if today's projections are borne out, a third of all Americans will be either Asian or Latino.

The America they come to is also different: at once more prosperous and unequal economically than it was a century ago, often making it harder for newcomers to assimilate into the middle class. The gap between rich and poor is wider than ever, creating what some social scientists call an "hourglass economy." In many cities, well-paid factory jobs have been replaced by service-sector work, and for some time now, real wages at the bottom of the pay scale have been declining rather than growing. On top of this, many newcomers settle in impoverished inner cities, where crime, drugs, gangs and broken families conspire to hinder their climb up the economic ladder. Getting an education—the most critical step in assimilating into the knowledge economy—is no easy matter in the barrios of, say, south central Los Angeles. Such neighborhoods can be so dangerous that it's hard even to get to school. And more often than not, your parents have less than a high-school education, making it difficult for them to do much to help you up the social ladder.

Some immigrant enclaves are better off: many Asian-Americans in California, for example, live in leafy, upscale suburbs. But pleasant as they are, these neighborhoods can be as insular as any ghetto: their ethnic shopping malls, ethnic restaurants and groceries, in-language newspapers, one-country Rotary Clubs, community banks, ethnic movie theaters and other amenities often make it unnecessary to have much contact with the integrated mainstream. The more newcomers arrive from the old country, the larger and more all-encompassing these enclaves—both rich and poor—grow, reducing incentives to make the difficult transition to a mixed neighborhood. Meanwhile, geographic proximity and cheap air travel allow newcomers to shuttle frequently back and forth to their home countries and, in some cases, to maintain dual citizenship and even vote in both places.

Then there are the cultural factors that conspire against assimilation: everything from the internet and niche advertising to color-coded identity politics. The attacks of September 11, 2001, have sparked new patriotism and a new confidence in what brings us together as Americans. Some forty years after the Black Power movement and the ethnic revival it sparked among people of all backgrounds, the excesses of group chauvinism seem finally to be fading a bit. But no mere swing of the cultural pendulum is going to repeal multiculturalism or erase the profound effect it has had on the way most Americans live and view the world. From the relativism that now reigns in intellectual circles to the way Congress divides up into monolithic ethnic caucuses, multiculturalism has become the civil religion of the United States. Those—and there may be some—who no longer notice its ubiquitous effects are our era's equivalent of Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*: little do they know that they've been speaking prose—or, in this case, worshipping ethnic difference—all their lives. Welcomed by some, deplored by others and mellowing as it may be today, this emphasis on origins and encouragement to cultivate what makes you different cannot help but complicate the course that a young man like Eddie travels as he makes his way into the mainstream.

The drumbeat of ethnocentric messages can be constant and unavoidable. In an inner city high school, native-born minority classmates tease you for listening and doing your homework—both widely condemned by poor blacks and Latinos as "acting white" or "selling out." If this doesn't

deter you, if and when you get to college, you'll be assailed by campus ethnic activists pressing you to question why you want to join the mainstream, racist and exploitative as it is seen to be. By the time you've finished your education, according to one study, you'll be far less likely to consider yourself an American, or even a hyphenated American, than you were as a young teenager. In many cases, by then, you'll see yourself simply as an aggrieved minority or as what some are now calling "ampersand Americans"—as in "Mexican & American."

When you reach young adulthood, politicians, pop stars, media personalities and marketers of every description will bombard you with reminders of what makes you different from the Anglos around you. The stable bilingualism taking hold in several regions of the country may make it harder for you to speak English as well as you'd like. An array of Spanish-language TV networks can spare you from subjecting yourself to mainstream television and its seductive lessons in becoming American. Nor does the government let you forget your ethnicity, reminding you powerfully at every turn with racial and ethnic preferences and other legal distinctions. The Supreme Court's 2003 decision upholding affirmative action at the University of Michigan, and enshrining "diversity" as a compelling national interest, can only further encourage new Americans to see themselves as different. No wonder many young people are questioning the traditional melting pot metaphor.

This doesn't mean we should inflate the threat. Today, as before in our history when the immigrant tide was rising, nativists peddle a frightening array of grim scenarios: balkanization, civil strife, economic ruin and worse. But very few of these nightmare visions are based in fact, and all are highly unlikely. Indeed, as this volume shows, the nation is steadily absorbing tens of millions of newcomers: people of all ages and backgrounds who are finding work, learning English, making their way through school and up into more comfortable circumstances than they knew at home or when they first arrived in America. Still, like any wholesale social shift or personal transformation of this magnitude, the integration of today's influx needs watching—and occasional tending.

What's the worst that could happen? The most dire scenario is that today's immigrants and their children will become tomorrow's underclass. A wide array of forces would have to conspire to create such an outcome, multiculturalism probably being the least potent among them. But combine overheated identity politics with a prolonged economic downturn, rising nativist prejudice and an unwelcoming political system – and isn't hard to imagine the catastrophe that would ensue. One need not look very far afield—consider any country in Europe with a significant immigrant population—to catch a glimpse of what the future could hold. Barred from settling permanently, denied equal rights, largely without access to political power, unable to close the education gap and cut off from the job opportunities that only a college degree or better can open for them, migrants languish at the bottom of the social pyramid in many of the world's most civilized nations. Imagine then that they come under the sway of angry ethnic leaders who encourage self-indulgent, self-defeating protest politics. An overzealous Americanization movement—determined to force-feed a coercive national identity without opening real economic or political opportunity—would only make matters worse. The all but certain result would be unending racial polarization—and a permanent class of less equal citizens and noncitizens who feel they are not part of society and, as a result, remain a persistent burden.

Such a scenario remains unlikely—one has to be deeply pessimistic about both the newcomers and the native-born to think it plausible. But it points clearly enough to the challenge facing the nation. There is much the mainstream can and should do to encourage immigrant integration—first and foremost, making the American educational system work for today’s newcomers as it worked in the past for an earlier influx. Also necessary over the long haul: plentiful economic opportunity, real access to political power and a meritocratic ethos like the one that allowed wave after wave of previous outsiders to climb the ladder of success in America. But, ultimately, nothing will be more important than sustaining a culture of inclusion: the culture of *e pluribus unum* that has made it possible for generations of newcomers not only to join the mainstream but, despite their difference, to feel that they belong. This, when it works, is the secret of the melting pot and the challenge we face today is keeping it alive.

A New Intellectual Current

But what about Eddie Liu and his doubts? Is what we as a nation want to encourage really assimilation? The very notion is almost a dirty word today. Some who oppose it are plainly extremists: people so taken with multiculturalism that they see being absorbed into a larger America as so much cultural “genocide.” Yet Eddie is no activist, and concerns like his are widely felt, particularly in his generation. To young people like him, “assimilation” implies a forced conformity. They feel that it would require them to give up what makes them special, and they dread being reduced to what they see as the lowest common denominator of what it means to be American. As for the melting pot, if anything, that seems even more threatening: who wants to be melted down, after all—for the sake of national unity or anything else?

Meanwhile, at the other end of the political spectrum are those who think that, desirable as it is, assimilation is no longer possible in America. Some in this camp are driven by racial concerns: they view today’s immigrants as simply too different ethnically ever to fit in in the United States. Others believe that the obstacles are cultural: that America has a distinct national ethos that cannot be grasped by any but a few newcomers—the better educated, perhaps, or those from Christian Europe. Still others feel that the problem lies less in the foreign influx than in ourselves: that in the wake of multiculturalism and the upheavals of 1960s, we as a nation have lost the confidence to assert who we are and what we believe in. But whatever their reasoning, all three kinds of pessimists have gained a wider hearing in the wake of 9/11 as the nation has grown ever more anxious about what many imagine are the unassimilated in our midst. And together, these two groups—those who believe assimilation is impossible and those who fear it—have come to dominate most discussion of the issue, leaving little room for those in the middle who take a more positive view.

That is the gap this book aims to fill, creating some middle ground between those who think assimilation is necessary but impossible and those, edging toward it, who see it as an unwelcome demand.

Hemmed in on both sides, hardly heard in the din of an often emotional debate, in fact, many of the thinkers who have thought longest and hardest about immigration believe that assimilation is still possible and indeed desirable, if not inevitable, today. They don’t all like or use that word—for some of the same reasons that Eddie has trouble with it. Very few imagine that it should look

as it looked in the 1950s: that it requires newcomers to forget their roots or abandon their inherited loyalties. And fewer still believe that it happens automatically—that it needs no tending or attention from the nation as a whole. Still, whatever word they use, these thinkers maintain that we as a nation not only can but must continue to absorb those who arrive on our shores: absorb them economically, culturally, politically and, perhaps most important, give them a sense that they belong. This is not a full-blown school of thought—its proponents disagree on too much else. But it is the intellectual current represented in this volume: a group of thinkers brought together for the first time in the belief that standing side by side, their arguments sound even stronger than each does alone.

The essayists in the book differ on far more than they agree upon. Academics and journalists, economic researchers and fiction writers, they hail from both the right and the left—and everywhere in between. Some feel that we should trim the number of foreigners we admit each year; others believe that if anything, immigration ceilings should be higher. Some see multiculturalism as a historic shift to be welcomed; others lament it—and fear what it means for the nation’s future. Though they come together around a common goal, they disagree sharply on many if not most points of policy. Is affirmative action a good idea? Should bilingual education be ramped up or phased out? Is ethnically pitched advertising something to be encouraged—a gesture of respect or a form of bigoted stereotyping? You’ll find no agreement on any of that in this volume. And even on the core issue—on just how assimilation does and should work—there are as many views as there are essays here.

What do the authors agree upon? In addition to the desirability of assimilation, most concur that it is indeed proceeding apace in the United States today. Like it or not, most immigrants and their children are becoming Americans, in every conceivable sense of the word. The essayists are divided on whether the way this happens today is the same as or different from the way it happened in the past for earlier waves of newcomers. Some emphasize how the immigrants are different now, others how the nation they are integrating into has been transformed – while still others think that none of this matters and the basic absorptive alchemy remains exactly as it has always been. Still, in considering the present, all the essayists agree that ethnicity need not be obliterated on the road to becoming American. Most if not all recognize that assimilation is a two-way street: that in the long run, the mainstream will change too, generally for the better, as it absorbs and accommodates the cultural variety of its newest members. Contributors diverge on how much—and what exactly—the nation should do to encourage immigrant absorption. Yet in the end, most understand that it is not something that can or should be forced. Punitive, coercive pressure for cultural conformity will not work: today, even more than in the past, that can only backfire.

Perhaps most important, whether or not they believe that today is different, virtually all understand that we need to find ways to talk about it that will be meaningful and resonant for a young man like Eddie Liu. If assimilation got a bad name in the 1950s—or 1920s—those misleading associations must be erased. If indeed the concept needs updating in the wake of multiculturalism, the sooner we as a nation do that, the better. Most critical, whether this requires a new definition or merely a refurbished one, the new understanding must accommodate the realities of the world we live in—must work in an era of globalization, identity politics, niche marketing and the hourglass economy.

Some people will call this emerging viewpoint revisionist, but a more descriptive term might be “realist.” The writers in this collection are not the first or only assimilationist thinkers to consider a new set of givens. Yet perhaps under pressure from what is happening in the world, their viewpoint is asserting itself with a new force, and the twenty-one original essays that follow represent some of the best realist thinking about assimilation in America today.

All have something to say to Eddie Liu and his perplexed peers. The first cluster of essays in the book asks whether Eddie is right about what assimilation traditionally meant. Did it in years past require the forced conformity he fears so much? And does it still do so today, or have times changed? Each of the five contributors in this section answers those questions differently. Still, in virtually every case, the picture they paint should ease Eddie’s concerns.

A second group of essays speaks to his fear that he would be making a bad bargain by assimilating—giving up much that is meaningful to him without gaining enough in return. And although the writers in this section differ about whether we as a nation are currently living up to our side of the contract, both agree that fundamentally it remains a good deal.

A third and fourth set of essays look at how assimilation is playing out on the ground today. Each writer in Part III examines a situation where incorporation seems to be working fairly well. And in each case—be it among Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans, in New York City or in instances where parents manage to help their children resist the pull of underclass culture—the pattern should help somewhat to reassure Eddie. For in all four instances, according to the authors, immigrants themselves play a significant role in determining how and on what terms they will enter into the mainstream and absorb its ways.

Part IV—two chapters each on economic and political assimilation—contains some of the sharpest disputes in the volume. But whether or not the authors feel that immigrant absorption is working as well as it might in the area they consider, none describes an America that leaves no room for ethnic particularity. On the contrary, if anything, the two pessimists in this section feel that the balance may have shifted too far toward the immigrant side of the scale, with America now unable to assert what it needs and should ask of newcomers

A fifth cluster of essays—another opposed pair—asks what the black experience in America tells us about the challenge facing today’s immigrants. The authors have very different ideas about exactly what lessons African-American history teaches. Yet neither thinks that today’s newcomers need fear a reprise of black history.

The sixth and final section of the book addresses the new immigrants’ most difficult question: what exactly are they assimilating into? What does America expect of them? And what indeed does it mean to be American today, in an era of multiculturalism, globalization and the challenges posed by terrorism? Here too, of course, the authors differ markedly: each sees the national identity through his or her own unique prism. Still, all these essays should be compelling reading for Eddie.

For ultimately, young people like him want most is a national story about America that they can identify with. The old story from the 1950s—true or not as it may have been at the time—plainly doesn't work for them. But it's not clear that the story of the 1980s and 1990s—a story built around the idea of diversity—does the job either. Much as they appreciate their own and others' ethnic backgrounds, even young people like Eddie seem increasingly to be hungering for something else, too: a larger, shared story that allows them to escape their narrow origins and provides an understanding of what holds us all together as Americans. The nation is changing profoundly—and both newcomers and the native-born need a way to make sense of what is happening. We need a beacon: not just a rationale but a shared narrative, a common vocabulary, symbols, songs and holidays that we can all buy into together. The essays in this volume cannot provide all of that, but they sketch some outlines for the story that is needed.

A word about terminology: as an editor, I've let the essayists use their own language to describe immigrant absorption. We all know that except in conservative circles, the term "assimilation" is unfashionable and worse—it can seem off-putting and even offensive. Some contributors defer to that sensibility; others bristle at what they see as PC euphemisms—or are simply determined to use what they feel is the most descriptive word. Still, no one in the book is advocating the kind of oppressive assimilation that Eddie and others dread. Nor should the title be taken to mean that any of the essayists argue for erasing ethnic differences, whether by assimilation, intermarriage or other means. The salad—or stew or mosaic—make strike some readers as a better metaphor. But the fact remains that the melting pot is the best shorthand we have for the age-old American tradition of integrating and absorbing newcomers.

Does the anthology have a bottom line? No simple formula can capture the complexity of the essays, but if there is a common denominator, it is that integration and identity need not be contradictory. A young man like Eddie doesn't have to choose whether he is Asian or American—the very idea is an abomination. In the end, contributors agree, assimilation is about finding a sustainable balance between what makes us different and what we have in common.

Both sides of the balance matter, and both can be difficult to get right. Yes, today more than ever, Americans need to be reminded of their commonalities. Distracted by multiculturalism and the divisiveness that can come with it, in the last decade or two, many of us lost sight of that shared identity. We forgot that we needed one—or didn't like the version we knew. And though, in the wake of 9/11, people feel a renewed need for a shared story, many are no longer sure what it is—aren't even really sure what it means to be an American.

Restoring that vision will not happen quickly or easily. What we have in common is far more important than our differences, and that may be difficult for some to accept. Though parts of the national identity are optional, most of it is not. And although it must leave room for ethnic attachments, the national ethos must also rise above them—to the point that there have to be limits on the place and role of particularity. To say that what is needed is balance doesn't mean that we can have it all. There are choices to be made. Some of them will pinch, and some conflict will be inevitable in arriving at an answer that can hold in our fractious era and beyond. There is no point in being Pollyannish: restoring a shared sense of American identity is a formidable challenge, one we have neglected for far too long.

But the ethnic side of the balance is real too, and those who fear difference, who deplore any kind of multiculturalism and see no room for particularity, are as much of a threat as those who think that it is all that matters. The truth is that difference is as American as the Stars and Stripes. Assimilation has always left room for a hyphen. And finding unity amid diversity, be it national or religious or some other kind, is a thread that runs throughout our history, arguably the most important one. True, through much of the 1990s, the balance between clan and commonweal seemed to be tilting out of whack, with too many people dwelling too much on their differences and too much ethnicity seeping into the public square. But there are signs that the balance may now be starting to right itself. And although plenty remains to be done to find a workable equilibrium, that is not an argument for overcorrecting.

In the long run, as the essays in this volume suggest, neither side need be quite so worried: not the questioning Eddie Liu nor those who are alarmed by his doubts about assimilation. In fact, Eddie is assimilating, and what he's assimilating to isn't as airless or oppressive as he fears. Still, both sides need to find new ways to think and talk about what is happening, and the essays in this book are a good place to start.

Preface

Assimilation: A Progress Report

Today as in the past, immigrant absorption has two main dimensions: objective and subjective. The first challenge facing any newcomer is to make a life in the new country: to find a job, master the language, eventually put down roots and launch one's children toward a better life. The second dimension is more nebulous: the long, slow process of coming to feel that one belongs in the new place. Although the essays in this volume contain a wealth of information about the external story, most are more concerned with the interior side—what assimilation means and how it is understood, by newcomers and the native-born alike. And so perhaps it is useful to set the scene for the chapters that follow with a brief description of today's immigrants: a few words and numbers about the more measurable aspects of their integration into American life.

The immigrant influx of the last forty years is a demographic shift of historic proportions. The percentage of the population that was born abroad is slightly lower than it was when the last great wave of immigrants arrived, at the beginning of the twentieth century: 11 percent now compared to 15 percent then. But the absolute number of newcomers living in the United States today is the highest it has ever been: some 31 million. Roughly 1.2 million arrive on our shores every year. One in nine Americans is an immigrant. And half the laborers entering the American workforce in the 1990s were foreign-born. Add in their families and extended families and the picture grows more dramatic still. Together, immigrants and their children now account for one in five Americans. Hispanics, at nearly 14 percent of the population, are already the largest minority, outnumbering blacks. Asian-Americans are still a relatively small share of the nation—at only 4 percent. But despite their numbers, they, too, are going to play a major part in the country's future: already, they make up between 15 and 20 percent of the students at most Ivy League colleges.

Where do these new arrivals come from? Just over half the foreign-born are Hispanic and a little more than a quarter are Asian. They hail from all the corners of the globe, though more from some countries than from others. Mexicans, by far the largest category, account for roughly one in three first-generation immigrants—almost ten times more than any other nationality. The next largest groups are Filipinos and Indians, followed by Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, Cubans and Salvadorans—but none of these account for more than 3 or 4 percent of the total.

What do the newcomers do for a living? They tend to be clustered at both the top and the bottom of the job ladder. A large percentage work in dirty, demeaning, low-paid jobs that native-born Americans no longer want to do: busboys, chambermaids, farmhands, nurses' aides, sweatshop workers, on the assembly-line in meatpacking plants. But a large number also work at the top of the job pyramid: as scientists, engineers, nurses, high-tech entrepreneurs and the like. Two of the statistics that paint this picture most vividly are the percentage of U.S. farmhands who are foreign-born (an astonishing 80 percent) and the percentage of patents that are held by foreigners (an equally astonishing 26 percent). Social scientists call this a "barbell pattern," and it has some predictable corollaries. Not surprisingly, today's newcomers are either quite rich or quite poor, and they are either very well educated or hardly educated at all. Roughly a quarter have less than

nine years of schooling, but an equal percentage have university degrees—a much larger share than the proportion of native-born Americans who have stayed in school that long.

Where in the United States do most immigrants settle? Until about ten years ago, they were concentrated in what demographers call “gateway cities”: New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Houston, Chicago. But this is changing dramatically and with profound consequences for the country. States such as New York and California and New Jersey are still home to the largest numbers. But the states with the fastest growing immigrant populations are places like North Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas and Tennessee. Even Iowa more than doubled its share in the 1990s. The cities where the immigrant population expanded the most in the past decade are equally surprising: Greensboro, N.C., Charlotte, N.C., Raleigh, N.C., Atlanta and Las Vegas. Still more of a departure, while some of today’s new arrivals still gravitate to urban areas, many head straight for the suburbs, and roughly half of all Asians and Latinos now live outside the center city. True, these are often older, less affluent, inner-ring suburbs: Port Chester rather than Scarsdale, say, in the New York metro area. But all around the country, from New York to California, suburban America is increasingly ethnic.

Whether or not they are assimilating is harder to quantify. Becoming an American is a complex, personal process—the kind of transition that can take a lifetime, even two. A Mexican farmhand with a sixth-grade education takes a different path into the mainstream than an Indian engineer working on an MBA, and the sometimes mind-boggling diversity of today’s immigrants can make it difficult to generalize. What’s more, even when one focuses on one group, it can be hard to assess just how well or how fast they are integrating. Economic success or failure, for example, is reflected in countless and sometimes contradictory statistics, and in today’s polarized immigration debate, any statistical portrait is sure to be controversial. Certainly, not all contributors to this volume will agree with every detail of the picture presented here. Nevertheless, a lot is known about today’s immigrants, and on the whole it adds up to an encouraging story.

Most foreigners, whether they arrive legally or illegally, come to the United States to work. Most do not come in the expectation of living on welfare: most are not entitled to most kinds of benefits for at least five years. Thanks to modern technology, they generally know from other immigrants who have preceded them from their regions whether or not work is available. And in economic downturns, when there are fewer jobs to be had, fewer immigrants seem to make the trip. After all, if you’re going to be unemployed, it’s much better to be unemployed at home than in the United States. It’s usually warmer at home and less expensive to live, and you are likely to be surrounded by a network of supportive family and friends. So while technically three-quarters of American immigrant visas are given out on the basis of family ties, the lion’s share of foreigners who come to the United States get a job—or two or three jobs—and work hard. This isn’t new: Hispanic males have long boasted the highest labor-force participation in the country, and most other immigrant groups are not far behind.

Of course, however hard they work, many poor, ill-educated immigrants who start at the bottom of the ladder remain there throughout their lives. This is not particularly surprising, and it may seem to vindicate those who claim that the United States today is importing a new lower class. But that’s part of the point of our immigration policy: America no longer has this kind of

working class, and it turns out that we need one. And even this does not necessarily mean the newcomers will not be absorbed into the economy or do well by it. Indeed while most brand-new arrivals make considerably less than the native-born, by the time they have been in the United States for ten or fifteen years, they are usually making more. (Mexicans are an exception—and a troubling one—but despite their overwhelming numbers and the way this weights any statistical measure, the overall immigrant average is still a success story.) By the time they've been in the country for fifteen to twenty years, immigrants are also less likely than the native-born to be living in poverty.

The trajectory of high-end immigrants—those who come with some money or an education—is even more impressive. Immigrant entrepreneurship is nothing short of astonishing—in the first and second generation and beyond. Asian and Latino business start-up rates were four times the average American rate in the 1990s. Most of these minority-owned firms were small, and most had no paid employees—but that was also true of the businesses owned by native-born Americans. And indeed Asian entrepreneurs were more successful than nonminority owners on virtually every measure. More of their businesses had employees; fewer fell in the smallest-of-the-small category, or what economists call “micro-businesses.” And despite the newcomers' relative lack of familiarity with American markets, an equal percentage of their concerns grossed over \$1 million a year.

In some cases, immigrants are not merely assimilating into a regional economy: they dominate it. In Silicon Valley in the 1990s, foreign-born scientists accounted for a third of the scientific workforce, and Chinese and Indian entrepreneurs ran a quarter of the high-tech companies. In New York, by one estimate, Korean immigrants own 70 percent of the independent groceries, 80 percent of the nail salons and 60 percent of the dry cleaners. In Los Angeles, an increasing share of the banks are Asian-owned, and newcomers—whether from the Middle East, North Africa or Korea—control most of the \$22 billion fashion industry. Whatever one calls it, there can be little question, immigrants are finding their place—and generally a productive place—in the American economy.

Of course, by definition, the first generation is transitional. Those who make the trip from the old country invariably live between two worlds and, if they arrive as adults, may never fully assimilate. Far more important in the long run is how their children fare, and to some degree, in America today, it's too soon to tell how the second generation is doing: the majority still have not reached adulthood. Nevertheless, the evidence is beginning to pour in.

There are some troubling signs—and no end of pessimistic predictions. Young people who were born abroad—or whose parents were—often start at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. They go to some of the worst schools in the country: failing, overcrowded inner-city schools. Many of their native-born classmates scorn mainstream success, and despite their parents' best efforts, some second-generation immigrants catch this bad attitude from their school friends. Alarmed by these conditions, many social scientists who study the second generation begin their research with a dire view of the young newcomers' chances—and indeed, the field can be divided into optimists and pessimists.

But in fact, as a group, immigrant children bring home a superb record card. The most important study of the second generation, conducted over the last decade in San Diego and Miami by sociologists Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut, found that whatever country they come from, across the board, immigrant children work harder than their native-born classmates. They do an average two hours of homework a night compared with the “normal” thirty minutes. They aspire to greater achievement, get better grades and drop out far less often—between a third and half as often. So if school performance is any guide, today’s second generation will certainly outstrip its parents.

The big question for the future is what kind of jobs these young people will get—whether and how fast they will be able to move up the socioeconomic ladder. Plainly, for many, there is cause for some concern. Not even the best students from inner-city schools of the kind many immigrants attend make it to college. As often as not, when they do, it’s a community college. For economic and family reasons, many of them do not finish, and of course this puts them at a disadvantage in today’s knowledge economy. But here too, what evidence we have suggests that the pessimists may be overstating the case. The main difference between optimists and pessimists is about what the benchmark should be: do we expect the second generation to do as well as the native-born—or simply better than their parents? In fact, most immigrant children seem at least as driven as their elders; they have the advantage of the language and familiarity with the culture. And while second-generation Latinos, for example, still earn less on average than native-born whites, they earn more than native-born blacks, and considerably more than first-generation Latinos—about 50 percent more. What’s most important, more hopeful scholars say, is the newcomers’ trajectory—and it points upward.

A third key component of assimilation is language. Are today’s newcomers and their children learning English? Do they even want to learn it? Many of the native-born fear not. Certainly, there is a great deal more Spanish in the air today than there was twenty or thirty years ago. One sees signs in Spanish wherever one goes. Politicians are racing to learn Spanish. Even corporate America is catching the bug, spending now up into the hundreds of millions of dollars a year on advertising in Spanish and other languages, including Mandarin Chinese. So it would be easy to surmise that immigrants are not learning English, particularly not Hispanic immigrants, who often live in large enclaves of other Spanish speakers, where, it is sometimes argued, you don’t need English to get by.

But in fact the conventional wisdom driving people to campaign and advertise in Spanish is quite wrong. True, the first generation often has trouble with English. This was true in 1900, and it’s true today. It’s hard to learn a new language as an adult. Even in homes where the children were born and raised in America, the predominant language is usually that of the parents, and according to the 2000 Census, some 10 percent of the U.S. population now lives in a household where Spanish is spoken—at first blush, an alarming number. But it’s a misleading number, because Spanish is rarely the only language spoken in these homes. For the Census Bureau, even one Spanish speaker—and in many cases, it’s an elderly grandparent—is enough to get a family classified as Spanish-speaking. And even in those households deemed to be Spanish-speaking, some 70 percent of the working-age adults speak English well or very well.

Besides, on this issue too, what really matters is the second generation: the linguistic future lies with those who come of age in the United States. And the fact is that despite the travesty that is bilingual education, virtually everyone who grows up in America today eventually learns English. This is true for every national group and at every socioeconomic level, and it happens no matter what language your parents or grandparents speak at home. According to the Census, even in the 10 percent of households that are “Spanish-speaking,” 85 percent of the children speak English well or very well. According to a 2002 survey by the Pew Hispanic Center, most second-generation Latinos are either bilingual (47 percent) or English-dominant (46 percent). (By the third generation, eight in ten are English-dominant.) And the San Diego-Miami second-generation study showed even more dramatic progress. Although more than 90 percent of the young people who participated in the study came from homes where a language other than English was spoken, by the end of their high school years, 98 percent spoke and understood English well or very well, and nine out of ten preferred it to their mother tongues—even if they couldn’t speak it better.

This evidence can be confirmed anecdotally by a visit to any immigrant neighborhood—even the poorest and most isolated Latino enclaves. In restaurants and shops and on the streets, adults are invariably speaking Spanish. But the children—even very young children, and even small siblings in families of Spanish-speaking adults—can often be heard speaking English among themselves. Even if they don’t learn much at school, children pick up English from TV and other popular culture; their parents know it is the key to their futures. And virtually no one who studies immigrants has any doubt about the long run: today as in the past, the United States is going to prove a “graveyard for languages.”

Still another indicator of assimilation is home-ownership—a telling sign, after all, that a newcomer is putting down roots and investing in the new country. And on this measure, too, today’s immigrants seem to be doing fairly well. True, as pessimists are quick to point out, many recent arrivals are anything but settled. They go back and forth to the old country. They often leave their families at home and maintain strong ties to the Old World. Still, after a while, they generally settle down. They ask their families to join them or they marry someone they’ve met in America, and within twenty years, 60 percent are homeowners. By the time they’ve been in the United States for twenty-five years, they are more settled than native-born Americans: a significantly higher share own their own homes. Indeed, for some years now, a research firm in California has been tabulating the most common last names among new home buyers, and the list is invariably dominated by Asian and Latino names: Garcia, Lee, Martinez, Nguyen, Rodriguez and Wong.

Similarly, with citizenship. True, today, unlike in the past, it is possible for people from many countries to maintain dual citizenship—and with it, perhaps, troubling dual or conflicting loyalties. Naturalization is a slow, gradual process, and among those who arrived in the years since 1990, less than 15 percent have become citizens. Still, among those who have been in America since 1970, as many as 80 percent are naturalized. If you stay, it turns out, you eventually join—today, as in the past, you graduate from sojourner to member. And for many newcomers, naturalization is a critical tipping point. Not only is it the moment when many begin to say “we” rather than “they” and feel that their fates are intertwined with America’s; it also tends to spur other steps, like buying a house and participating in the political process.

For social scientists, the ultimate measure of assimilation is the ethnic intermarriage rate—and in America today, it is nothing short of astounding. Among U.S.-born Asians and Hispanics, between a third and a half marry someone of a different ethnicity. By the third generation, according to some demographers, the rates reach over 50 percent for both groups. And in places with large numbers of newcomers, this can have dramatic consequences. In Los Angeles County, for example, among people under forty, more than one in five marriages involves a mixed-race couple—and some 15 percent of the babies born in California are now born into mixed-race families.

Meanwhile, arguably even more interesting than this evidence from social science, a similar picture of today's immigrants is taking shape in corporate America—among people whose livelihoods depend on gauging new Americans' tastes and values. A new industry has sprung up in the last decade or so that focuses exclusively on selling to ethnic customers: a burgeoning network of advertisers, consultants and in-house marketing departments—evidence in itself of the newcomers' galloping economic assimilation. The estimates of minority purchasing power change almost too fast to keep track of them, but according to one study, Latino buying muscle grew by 160 percent in 2002 alone, and if it were a separate country, Hispanic America would now boast the eleventh largest GDP in the world. As recently as two or three years ago, most advertisers assumed that assimilation was a long, slow process—that no matter how much money Latino customers had to spend, they were best reached by Spanish-language ads produced in a stodgy old-country style and aired on Spanish-language television. But all of this is changing dramatically in response to new research about the ethnic market.

One recent survey of young Hispanics in New York and Los Angeles conducted by the California firm, Cultural Access Group, paints a picture of what its authors call the “post-ethnic” generation. These young people generally speak Spanish at home, but English with their friends. They prefer English to Spanish by a ratio of five to one. They watch at least twice as much English-language TV as Spanish programming. When they use the internet, it's virtually always in English. And when asked how they identify culturally, their answers are far more likely to be about the kind of the music they listen to—most often, hip hop or mainstream pop—than about their parents' ethnic origins. Cultural Access Group didn't ask for details about whom they date, but it isn't hard to guess: anyone and everyone. (Indeed, according to another recent survey, more than 60 percent of all American teens have dated someone of another race or ethnic group.) No wonder the most savvy corporate marketers are now switching strategies: abandoning the old-fashioned Spanish-language approach and producing ads in English or Spanglish, usually with a racy, international flavor, to run on mainstream media as well as Spanish-language TV and radio.

Finally, in addition to social scientists and marketers, opinion researchers too have something to say about assimilation. What do immigrants themselves report about the fateful choices they've made and the way their lives have been transformed? Do they feel they are becoming truly American? Do their opinions shift in some tangible, measurable way the longer they live in the United States? Although it is notoriously difficult to pin down attitudes of this kind, accumulating survey data adds intriguing highlights to the picture.

When asked how they feel about America, newcomers are invariably positive—often extravagantly so. A recent survey by the polling firm Public Agenda asked immigrants whether they would still come to the United States if they were making the decision again today, and an astonishing 80 percent said yes. Asked about what their new home meant to them, a similar eight in ten said that America is a “unique country” that “stands for something special in the world.” As for assimilation, according to one of the largest and most comprehensive surveys of Latinos, conducted by the Washington Post in 1999, 84 percent believe it is “important” or “very important” for immigrants “to change so that they blend into the larger society, as in the idea of the melting pot.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that newcomers want to give up who they are or the legacies they brought with them to America. The same Washington Post survey found that 89 percent—roughly the same portion that endorsed the melting pot—also said it was important for “Latinos to maintain their distinct cultures.” Given half a chance, there is no one more patriotic than a new immigrant. But many newcomers are plainly hoping to have it all: to become Americans and hold on to their old cultures, too.

Nor are immigrants and their children immune to the identity politics they encounter in America. On the contrary, a good deal of what they assimilate to in the United States today is precisely identity politics. When they arrive, they tend to think of themselves as Mexicans or Chinese or Vietnamese, and most adults hang on to those national labels. But as the San Diego-Miami second-generation study found, their children quickly come to see themselves as Latinos or Asian-Americans, and they often believe this sets them apart from the mainstream in important ways. Still, if one takes a closer look at how immigrants’ deeper, personal values change over time as they remain in the United States, identity politics can look less significant—for generally, no matter what newcomers say about themselves, surveys show that their values and priorities are gradually transformed by exposure to American life.

Consider, for example, how Latinos feel about the relative importance of family and work, about whether one’s private life is more important than getting ahead. This is profound personal issue, a key indicator of who one is and how one lives. And in general, on this question, Latinos answer markedly differently than native-born whites: they’re much more inclined to put their personal lives first. Asked whether their first priority is work or family, non-Hispanic whites split roughly 50–50, while among Latinos, the ratio is more like 70–30, with the emphasis on family. Nevertheless, when one recent survey by the Pew Hispanic Center divided its Latino sample into two groups—first- and second-generation, or those who spoke English well and those who didn’t—pollsters found a dramatic bifurcation, with the native-born and the English-dominant coming much closer to white norms, if not matching them.

The same holds true of attitudes on a wide range of personal questions from views about divorce and homosexuality to the most closely held existential values. To assess change on these topics, the Pew poll divided its foreign-born sample according to the age they had immigrated and how long they had lived in the United States, then compared the subgroups’ answers. The results were startling: one could almost see the newcomers becoming more American with every passing year. The survey probed deep-seated attitudes often thought to be at the heart of Hispanic culture. Are relatives more important than friends? How important is it for grown children to stay close to their families? Can you control the future enough so that it’s worth your while to make plans—or is it better to accept whatever happens fatalistically? Even on these core values,

English-dominant Latinos polled dramatically differently than the Spanish-dominant. Nearly 60 percent of Spanish-speakers, for instance—compared to 15 percent of non-Hispanic whites—were so fundamentally fatalistic that they saw no point in planning for the future. But among second-generation and English-dominant Hispanics, 75 percent said that they felt they were in charge of their lives. America had already changed them that much—they had assimilated that thoroughly.

In the end, of course, the jury is still out. It's far too soon to say anything definitive about the vast and varied influx of immigrants still arriving on our shores. Their fate will depend on many things—on them, but also on us and what we expect of them. And whether or not today's relatively hopeful trends continue will rest to a significant degree on how both we and they come to understand assimilation. That more subjective, and prescriptive, side of the story is the subject of the essays that follow.

FN1. That isn't his real name.

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