The New Face of America

The number of young Americans who identify themselves as multiracial is soaring. What effect will they have on the country's racial identity?

BY SUSAN SAULNY IN COLLEGE PARK, MARYLAND

sk Michelle López-Mullins, a junior at the University of Maryland and the president of the school's Multiracial and Biracial Student Association, how she marks her race on forms like the census, and she says, "It depends on the day, and it depends on the options."

López-Mullins, 20, is Chinese and Peruvian on one side and white and American Indian on the other. She's is part of a generation of young adults of mixed racial backgrounds who are rejecting the color lines that have defined Americans for decades in favor of a more fluid sense of identity.

The crop of students moving through college right now includes the largest group of mixed-race people ever to come of age in the United States, and they are only the vanguard: The country is in the midst of a demographic shift driven by both immigration and intermarriage.

It's a sea change from how things were 50 years ago: In 1961, mixed-race marriages were illegal in at least 16 states. Then in 1967, those laws were declared unconsti-

tutional by the Supreme Court's *Loving* v. *Virginia* ruling. In the years since, interracial marriage among all groups has skyrocketed.

Today one in seven new marriages is between spouses of different races or ethnicities, according to the Pew Research Center. Multiracial and multiethnic Americans (usually grouped together as "mixed race") are one of the country's fastest-growing demographic groups; census estimates from 2009 indicate there are about 7.5 million. And the racial results of the 2010 Census are expected to show the trend continuing or even accelerating.

Transcending Race?

Laura Wood, 19, a sophomore at the University of Maryland, is half black and half white. "I think it's really important to acknowledge who you are and everything that makes you that," she says. "If someone tries to call me black I say, 'Yes—and white."

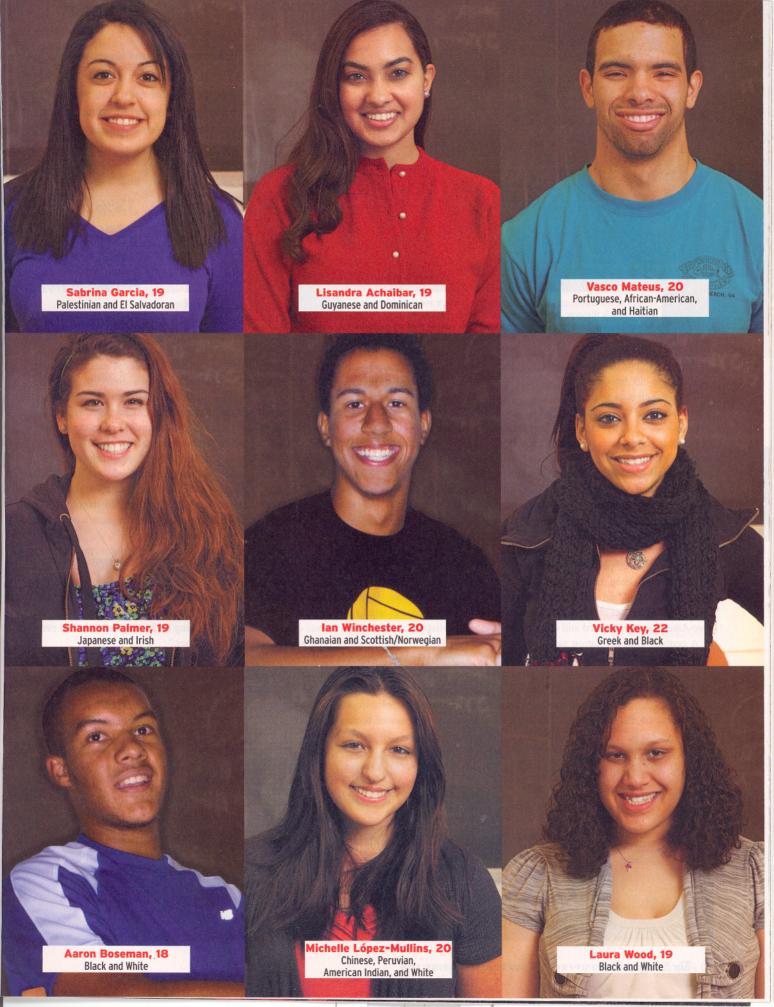
No one knows how the growth of the multiracial population might change the country. Optimists say the blending of the races is a step toward transcending race, toward an America free of bigotry and prejudice.

Pessimists say that a more powerful multiracial presence will lead to more stratification and come at the expense of other minority groups, particularly African-Americans, who could lose influence.

And some sociologists say that grouping all multiracial people together glosses over differences in circumstances between someone who is, say, black and Latino and someone who is Asian and white. Among interracial couples, white-Asian pairings tend to be better educated and have higher incomes, according to Reynolds Farley at the University of Michigan. And the rates of intermarriage are lowest between blacks and whites, which may be a result of the economic and social distance between them.

Rainier Spencer, director of the Afro-American Studies program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, thinks there is too much "emotional investment" in the notion

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Who's Marrying Who

Percentage of men and women in each group married to someone of another race or ethnicity

	MEN	WOME
White	5%	4%
Black	13%	6%
Hispanic	36%	37%
Asian	10%	23%
American Indian	55%	57 %

SOURCE: THE NEW YORK TIMES; NUMBERS HAVE BEEN ROUNDED

of multiracialism as a panacea for the nation's age-old divisions.

"The mixed-race identity is not a transcendence of race; it's a new tribe," he says.

Americans mostly think of themselves in singular racial terms. Consider President Barack Obama's answer to the race question on the 2010 Census: Although his mother was white and his father was black, the President checked only one box, black, even though he could have marked both races.

'One-Drop Rule'

Of course, some portion of the country's population has been mixed-race since the first white settlers had children with Native Americans. What has changed is how mixedrace Americans are defined and counted.

A century ago, the nation saw itself in a range of hues: The 1890 Census included categories for racial mixtures such as quadroon (one-fourth black) and octoroon (one-eighth black). And all the censuses from 1850 to 1920, with one exception, included a mulatto category, which was for people who had any perceptible trace of African blood.

But by the 1930 Census, terms for mixedrace people had disappeared, replaced by the so-called one-drop rule, an antebellum (pre-Civil War) convention that held that anyone with even a bit of African ancestry was black, period. (Similarly, people who were white and Indian were generally counted as American Indian.)

By the 1970s, Americans were expected to designate themselves as members of one officially recognized racial group: black, white, American Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, or "other," an option used frequently by people of Hispanic origin. (The census considers "Hispanic" an ethnicity, not a race.)

The 2000 Census was the first in which Americans were allowed to choose more than one race. The multiracial option came about after years of complaints, mostly by the white mothers of biracial children who objected to their children being allowed to check only one race. In 2000, 7 million people-about 2.4 percent of the population—reported being more than one race.

According to estimates from the Census Bureau, the mixed-race population has grown by roughly 35 percent since 2000. And many researchers think the census and other surveys undercount the mixed-race population. The 2010 mixed-race statistics are being released a few states at a time over the next few months.

"There could be some big surprises," says Jeffrey Passel at the Pew Hispanic Center, meaning that the number of mixed-race Americans could be substantially higher than the estimates. "There's not only less stigma to being in these groups, there's even positive cachet."

The faces of mixed-race America are not just visible on college campuses; they're in politics, business, and sports. And the ethnically ambiguous are especially ubiquitous in movies, television shows, and advertising.









Famous **Multiracial Faces**

(left to right): Alicia Keys, Apolo Anton Ohno, Christina Aguilera, and President Obama

"Advertisers want to make sure they're reaching everybody," says Robert Thompson, a professor of media at Syracuse University. "If anybody wants to be inclusive, featuring mutiracial people is one way to appear diverse in a very abbreviated way."

Not 'Ozzie and Harriet'

And since so much advertising is aimed at young people, *New York Times* advertising columnist Stuart Elliott says, featuring multiracial Americans "is a way to say, 'See, we get it: It's not *Ozzie and Harriet* anymore; it's a different America."

There are news, social networking, and dating Web sites focusing on the mixed-race audience. There are mixed-race film festivals, conferences, and student groups like the one at the University of Maryland, which offer peer support and activism.

"The No. 1 reason why we exist is to give people who feel like they don't want to choose a side, that don't want to label

themselves based on other people's interpretations of who they are, to give them a place, that safe space," says López-Mullins.

Not all of the 100 or so members of the Multiracial and Biracial Student Association at the University of Maryland are multiracial; the group welcomes anyone.

At a meeting in the fall, David Banda, who is Hispanic, and Julicia Coleman, who is black and Indian, came just to unwind among supportive listeners. They discussed the frustrations of being an interracial couple, even today, especially back in their hometown, Upper Marlboro, Maryland.

"When we go back home, let's say for a weekend or to the mall, they see us walking and I get this look, you know, sort of giving me the idea: 'Why are you with her? You're not black, so she should be with a black person,'" says Banda, 20. "Even some of my friends tell me, 'Why don't you date a Hispanic girl?'"

Banda and Coleman are thinking about

having children someday. "One of the main reasons I joined is to see the struggles mixed people go through," Banda says, "so we can be prepared when that time comes."

Kilts and Dashikis

Despite the growth of the mixed-race population, there are challenges.

Ian Winchester, a junior who is part Ghanaian, part Scottish-Norwegian, says he has always felt both lucky and torn about being biracial. His Scottish grandfather was keen on dressing him in kilts as a boy. The other side of the family would put him in a dashiki, a brightly colored shirt common in West Africa.

"I do feel empowered being biracial," he says. "The ability to question your identity—identity in general—is really a gift."

But, Winchester continues, "I don't even like to identify myself as a race anymore. My family has been pulling me in two directions about what I am. I just want to be a person."

Top 10 Multiracial States Percentage States with the most people identifying themselves as "two or more races" of State **Population** California 1.406.584 3.8% **Texas** 531,152 2.1% **New York** 391,649 2.0% Florida 357,839 1.9% Hawaii 306,306 23.6% Washington 283,433 4.3% Oklahoma 263,307 7.1% 231,440 Illinois 1.8% Ohio 204,522 1.8% Michigan 197,515 2.0%

SOURCE: JEFFREY PASSEL, PEW HISPANIC CENTER (2009 NUMBERS).