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The New Face of Race

Every day in America, we are redrawing the color lines and redefining what race really means. It's not just a matter of black and white anymore; the nuances of brown and yellow and red mean more— and less—than ever. The promise and perils ahead.

By Jon Meacham
NEWSWEEK

September 18 issue — For Carlos Aguilar, growing up in Birmigham, Ala., isn't a matter of black and white. At 17, his mind is mostly on life at Hoover High School, the largest in the state, and on getting ready for the next track season. The son of Peruvian immigrants who started a construction business in Birmingham in the early 1980s, Aguilar is coming of age in what was perhaps the most segregated city in the nation just a generation ago. "I have lots of black

friends, lots of white friends, Mexican friends, everything," says Aguilar, who's dated Latinas, whites and Indians and listens to rock, R&B, and hip-hop.

COMPLETE STORY

HISTORY IS THICK HERE, but to the young the violent clashes between Bull Connor and Martin Luther King Jr. can seem as distant as the Western Front. An eighth-grade field trip to Birmingham's Civil Rights Institute, where exhibits chronicle snarling police-dog attacks on black schoolchildren, left Aguilar puzzled. "It's just a whole different world in there," he recalls thinking. "A lot of it I look at and wonder, 'How did this stuff happen?'"

Aguilar's America is a very different place, but it is still far from the Promised Land. One day when Carlos was little, another child asked him: "Did you come here riding on a donkey?" Aguilar was upset, and there was a small scuffle. The family still remembers the flap. "People think if you have black hair you must be Mexican or illegal," says his mother, Ada. "But my grandfather," she proudly adds, "was of Spanish descent. Peruvians are a combination of the Incas and the Spanish, and the Spanish come from Germany, France, Italy, Arabia—it's a never-ending story."

America is busy writing new chapters every day. We are now in an Age of Color in which the nuances of brown and yellow and red are as important, if not more so, than the ancient divisions of black and white.

With their precise distinctions about their own Peruvian bloodlines, the Aguilars are on the cutting edge of the nation's redefinition of race—a quiet, daily revolution that is raising

urgent questions about who we are, what we call ourselves and how we deal with one another.

There used to be three Census categories; now there are 30, with 11 Hispanic subsets.

NEWSWEEK has a long history of pioneering race coverage. In 1963 the magazine launched the first extensive survey of black opinion; four years later, we published a landmark editorial, “The Negro in America: What Must Be Done.” In the ’70s and ’80s we charted the wars over affirmative action; in the ’90s, the Los Angeles riots, O. J. Simpson and the emergence of Latin U.S.A. Now, in 2000, immigration is up, intermarriage—1.3 million and rising—is ever more common and Jennifer Lopez and Ricky Martin are cross-cultural phenoms. The result: the national conversation about race must shift, too, and all of us must think more broadly about the changing face of America. This Special Report is NEWSWEEK’s latest exploration of the real lives being lived on the front lines of the most significant cultural and ethnic sea change in the country’s history.

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In 1860, just before Fort Sumter, there were only three Census categories—white, black and “quadroon.” This year there are 30, from Asian Indian to Other Pacific Islander, and there are 11 subcategories under “Hispanic ethnicity.” Last week white Californians became a “minority,” at 49.9 percent; two other states (Hawaii and New Mexico) and Washington, D.C., are also “majority-minority.” Florida and Texas will reach the same tipping point before the decade is out. The definitions of race and ethnicity have rarely been more fluid, the promise greater, the possible perils more pronounced.

This is not a futuristic vision; it’s here. The young, in fact, are already living in a new country. An entire generation has grown up in prosperity, attended schools with people of mixed backgrounds and set out to work in the New Economy, where there are few walls and little hierarchy. By 2010, Latinos will outpace blacks as the nation’s largest minority population. By 2020 the number of people of Asian descent will double, from 10 million to 20 million. By 2050 whites will make up a slim majority—53 percent. Last week the Bureau of Labor Statistics announced that the number of foreign-born workers has hit 15.7 million, the highest level in seven decades. Nashville is desperate for Spanish speakers to respond to 911 calls, and teachers in Rogers, Ark., are dispatched to Mexico in the summers to better absorb the culture from which so many of their pupils come. A lawyer in Birmingham recently built a new

swimming pool. The languages spoken by the workers: Polish, Italian, Spanish and Arabic.

The old labels can't capture the shifting subtleties of blood, culture, and identity.

The face of the New Economy is changing even more rapidly than that of the Old. In Silicon Valley, the report that whites were now a "minority" wasn't news to a white Netscape engineer who works on a team that is at least half Indian: the influx of Indians, other Asians and Hispanics brought whites below the 50 percent mark two years ago. At Cisco Systems' San Jose headquarters, the work force is 45 percent Asian. As the demand for high-tech talent grows, the Valley offers a glimpse of the future. The United States does not produce enough graduates literate in math and science, but India and China generate surpluses. Washington gets the message. Over the years, and over the protests of U.S. labor unions, Congress has steadily increased the number of H1-B visas for immigrant "knowledge workers."

AUDIO Newsweek On AirThe New America: Redefining Race

Yet the new America is fighting most of its battles, and finding its way, far from the Beltway. Politics is where our extremes generally clash, and the most incendiary conflict has long been black vs. white—free states vs. slave, North vs. South, defiance vs. Main Justice. There is no question that African-Americans still bear heavy burdens, disproportionately suffering from poverty, imprisonment and racial profiling. In Campaign 2000, however, the old dualities have given way to a multiplicity of ethnic forces, and the long-running bull market has—for now—dulled racial and ethnic wedges. There is, for instance, no "Hispanic" voting bloc. In Florida Cubans lean Republican, as do many Mexicans in Texas. But Mexicans in California, like Puerto Ricans in New York, trend Democratic. Al Gore and George W. Bush understand the numbers (nearly 8 million Hispanic voters in key states): that's why they're breaking into Spanish on the stump. Their battle plans offer a glimpse of the new politics, since both are making the same pitches to white and nonwhite voters. Bush pushes vouchers and "traditional values"; Gore's "working families" can be any color. Last week the Texas governor went to the Detroit suburbs with Colin Powell, perhaps the most famous black Republican in history. But the venue was colorblind. They were in a VFW hall, preaching the gospel of military preparedness to aging white veterans. Meanwhile, the vice president traveled to the heart of downtown Detroit and there, in the midst of one of the largest concentrations of blacks in the coun- try, made virtually

no play to the base. “We are all in this together,” he said. Ethnicity has rarely seemed to matter less in politics.

The New America

In every corner of America, we are redefining race as we know it. In a Special Report, Newsweek tells the stories of the people on the front lines, from the suburbs of the South to the plants of the Midwest, to the start-ups of Silicon Valley.

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- Hispanics: 'Mexicano' against 'Chicano'
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But that could change, and probably will. “History, like nature, knows no leaps—except the leap backward, maybe,” wrote Robert Penn Warren at the height of resistance to integration in 1956. An economic slowdown might encourage politicians—if not nationally, certainly locally—to find a “them” to blame for bad times. A Bush loss might be particularly jarring to the placid Republican tone of the moment: it’s not hard to imagine the armies of the right declaring war on the armies of “compassion” if a President Gore takes office next January.

There are tricky crosscurrents in the Age of Color. Eve Sampson, who’s taught in Orange County, Calif., for the past 15 years, struggles to manage the tension between Filipino and Vietnamese kids. “I have to admit that as a black person, I had no idea the anger one group had for the other,” Sampson says. “There’s a lot of talk of who’s survived the most and who made the transition the smoothest while here and who has the most visible success.” In L.A.’s Crenshaw district 100 children of marriages between Africans and African-Americans gather for meetings of a support group that focuses on easing resentments between the two cultures.

Language can’t keep up with the changing calculus. Ryan Yamasaki, the 16-year-old son of a Japanese father and a West Indian mother, is sometimes unsure which label he’s supposed to use. On school-testing forms, he checks “Asian,” but when asked how he truly identifies himself, he says, “I’m mixed.” One of Yamasaki’s fellow students at L.A.’s Fairfax High,

David Seidner, is Chinese-Cuban with elements of Spanish and Austrian blood. In Portland, Ore., where he lived until he was 16, “I would say I was white,” but when he moved to L.A., “my jaw dropped. I had never seen so many minorities.” Suddenly it was cool to be mixed. Now he says he’s “Cuban and Cantonese.” He’s a practical guy: with open-minded girls, Seidner says, “you get more play.” Nadine Mundo, a 24-year-old filmmaker in San Francisco, is the daughter of a Puerto Rican father and a Jewish mother. “Being mixed, it’s kind of a weird combination of being everything, but being nothing, too... All of these things are kind of subtle.”

Carlos Aguilar knows what she means. At school he’s part of the mainstream; at home in Birmingham his parents serve Peruvian food and listen to Peruvian music, and his mother says he and his sister speak English for the first half hour or so every afternoon they get home, then slip effortlessly into Spanish. As he glides between two worlds, he is making both his own. His friends in the Alabama suburbs, he says, see him as who he is, not where his parents came from. “They all know me, they know what I’m about,” says Aguilar. “Everybody has their own respect for everybody.” A voice from the young, a prayer for the nation.

With Arian Campo-Flores, Vern E. Smith, Karen Breslau, Allison Samuels and Lynette Clemetson

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