

Gabriele Pisarz-Ramirez, Frank Usbeck, Anne Grob,  
Maria Lippold (Eds.)

## Selling Ethnicity and Race

Consumerism and Representation  
in Twenty-First-Century America

Bernd Engler, Michael Hochgeschwender, Günter Leypoldt,  
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## Acknowledgments

This volume gathers the contributions of an international conference at Leipzig University in November 2013 that was convened and organized by American studies scholars from Leipzig and Dresden: Gabriele Pizarz-Ramirez, Anne Grob, and Maria Lippold from Leipzig University, and Frank Usbeck from TU Dresden. The conference brought together participants from Boston University, San Francisco State University, UCLA, SUNY Stony Brook, Florida State University, and from various German universities. This event and the present publication reflect the enhanced interest in research on ethnic minorities both in the US and in Germany in view of demographic changes within the US population, as well as the particular attention the production and performance of ethnic and racial identities claims in a period that is sometimes paradoxically labeled ‘post-ethnic’ or ‘postracial.’ Not least, the conference and the volume are also the result of new research opportunities provided by the establishment of the Leipzig chair for American Studies and Minority Studies in 2010.

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Gabriele Pizarz-Ramirez, Frank Usbeck, Anne Grob, and Maria Lippold

Leipzig and Dresden, July 2015





Gabriele Pisarz-Ramirez, Frank Usbeck, Anne Grob, and Maria Lippold

## **Selling Ethnicity and Race: Consumerism and Representation in Twenty-First-Century America**

*Latinos, Inc.; Shopping for Identity; or The New Mainstream: How the Multicultural Consumer Is Transforming American Business* are just a few of many recent publications signaling not only the new attention that population groups traditionally ignored by marketers and advertisers now claim within American consumer society but also reflecting the fascination of mainstream consumers with ethnicity. In contemporary US consumer culture, ethnicity ‘sells’: Both the demand and the supply of ethnic products have grown dramatically over the past two decades. The revival of ethnic festivals, the emergence of supermarkets specializing in ethnic foods, the presence of ethnic elements in advertising as well as the increasing visibility of Latinos,<sup>1</sup> Asian Americans, or African Americans in media marketing campaigns suggest a vital interest in ethnicity that at least partially reflects the demographic changes American society is currently undergoing. From 2000 to 2010, population growth in the United States was driven almost exclusively by racial and ethnic minorities (Passel and Cohn i). By 2050, nearly one in five Americans (nineteen percent) will be foreign-born and the non-Hispanic<sup>2</sup> white majority will have turned into a minority. The Hispanic share of the US population could then be as high as twenty-nine percent, according to the Pew Research Center (Passel and Cohn i). The Asian American population which is now the highest-income, best-educated, and fastest-growing racial group in the United States is projected to increase to nine percent from its current five percent (Passel and Cohn 2), while the Black population will rise only slightly (Taylor and Cohn). The enlarged buying power of many previously marginalized ethnic minority groups translates into their heightened attractiveness to the market world. That this celebration of ethnicity is not an isolated American trend but part of a global movement towards commodification in which ethnic theme parks, “nation-branding,” and global ethnic marketing are just some of the effects of neoliberal-

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of legibility, we will use the term ‘Latino’ and its plural ‘Latinos’ to refer to both Latinas and Latinos throughout this introduction.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Hispanic’ will be exclusively used in reference to the census data cited in this introduction. Otherwise, we will refer to the respective minority group as ‘Latinos’ (see footnote 1).

alism becomes evident in studies such as William Mazzarella's *Shoveling Smoke: Advertizing and Globalization in Contemporary India* (2003); John L. and Jean Comaroff's *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009); or Ben Pitcher's recent *Consuming Race* (2014), to name just a few.

What is the relationship between the revival of ethnicity in a commercial setting and the invocation, by critics such as David Hollinger, of a "postethnic America"? The success of things ethnic seems to contradict the need to move 'beyond' ethnicity and beyond the diversity propagated by multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s. The apparent contradiction between the flourishing of ethnic labels, products, and iconographies in consumer culture and the envisioned disappearance of ethnicity in our age dissolves if we look more closely at the way ethnicity is conceptualized in the discourses of postethnicity and of consumerism. David Hollinger's call in *Postethnic America. Beyond Multiculturalism* for a negotiated balance between the insistence on cultural difference and the need for a common ground, for a way to "achieve political cohesion" (xii) and to provide "an orientation toward cultural diversity strong enough to process the current conflicts and convergences that make the problem of boundaries more acute than ever" (1), implies a concept of ethnic affiliation based on choice rather than on birth. The same holds true, as Amrijit Singh and Peter Schmidt have pointed out, for other advocates of what they call the "postethnicity school" (6). As they observe,

[t]hose in this group acknowledge American cultural contradictions but tend to stress a progressivist narrative of the U.S. as a society of increasing inclusion, especially after 1965—a world in which ethnic identities should be understood as a prelude or base through which to join a society "beyond ethnicity" where cultural identities are formed by "consent," voluntary pluralism and "postethnic" or hybrid cultural multiplicities. (6)

The use of the concept of postethnicity as described by Singh and Schmidt is often characterized by a historical amnesia concerning the history of violence and exclusion suffered by many ethnic and racial groups in the US, a history that was the starting point for most ethnic and racial civil rights movements. Rather than focusing on the history of political, racial, and class controversies, advocates of the "postethnicity school," as Singh and Schmidt point out, reiterate a reading of American culture as "continually self-correcting towards inclusiveness" (6), a reading that they trace back to the "ethnicity school" of American studies led by Werner Sollors in the 1980s, as well as to earlier scholars such as Gunnar Myrdal and Oscar Handlin in the 1940s and 1950s, and Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s (6). The marked orientation towards the future that is often characteristic of the discourse of postethnicity is also a strong marker of discourses that link ethnicity to the marketplace. In this context, the