

## On Cultural Diversity Carl Peel

As a kid, I had many friends from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds than myself: Miguel Garcia, Derrick Padilla, Lara Peña, Eddie Viscussi, people whose skin was perhaps darker than mine, whose last names weren't the ubiquitous Smith or Jones, who ate different food than I did, and some of whom may have had a distinct accent. But until I thought about it later as an adult, I had no idea how, or even *that*, their home life or individual cultures were different than mine. I did have dinner one night at Eddie Viscussi's house and realized his family was *very* Italian, his parents having immigrated from Naples, and that fresh were sweet, that fresh grated Parmesan cheese was infinitely more flavorful than the dried stuff from the green can I was used to. But that was the exception to the norm and its lesson wouldn't dawn on me until years later. It did start my enculturation though, taking on the Italian approach to fresh ingredients, and piqued my interest in various things that were "different," even within my experience growing up with a father who identified himself as Italian-American.

Gradually, I realized how culturally diverse a place Los Angeles, where I was raised, is and always has been, even if that fact wasn't often apparent due to assimilation, ethnocentrism, and plain old racism among many of our fellow citizens. Cultural diversity is one of the great strengths of Los Angeles and of the United States in general. And when the cultures are each recognized, valued and integrated in multiculturalism, it really shines. Like the English language itself, with its foundations in Germanic Anglo-Saxon, the Romantic Latin of the Romans and the Legal language of the French, as well as the lesser known influence of the Celtic of the Britons, Picts and Irish, or the Norse influence of the Viking raids and settlements, a language which continues borrowing from anywhere and everywhere to this day, like that language, our society is made richer from the multiple and diverse cultures in their varying degrees of assimilation and separateness. Multiculturalism in some ways, I feel, defines our city. I don't think there's a place benefiting more from cultural diversity.

The ability to go to a low-rider show in Whittier, have a great Korean lunch in Koreatown or go hear music in the Belizean community in South Central are true pleasures, but more than that, the experience leads to new ways of thinking, new variations of art, of language, food, or even dress. And when these communities break out of their enclaves, when Korean Barbeque finds its way to Pasadena, or low-riders cruise Olympic Blvd. in West L.A., it's all for the better.

I've seen attitudes in the dominant, white-Anglo culture shift, even within my own family. The attitude of many around me as a kid was that everyone should assimilate. I never heard my great-grandmother, who came here from Norway, speak Norwegian. She and all of my ancestors fully acculturated. I find it a shame. My mother sometimes complained that she heard too much Spanish spoken in shops. She would attempt a lesson in socialization under her breath, that immigrants needed to speak English if they were to be here. I don't think they *have* to, but I recognize learning it would help them get ahead here, and if they want to, I'd like to help. But I hope they keep their culture as well. Don't let it die. In the process of teaching, I know I'll learn a lot about other people, and the worlds they come from, and we'll all be better off with richer ways of thinking, speaking, eating, and living. Later in life, even my mother agreed.