P atricia Rodriguez, an advertising sales director for a women’s magazine in New York, has light brown skin and thick, curly hair. She says that she resembles the actress Rosie Perez, and others have told her that she looks like the singer Sade.

Yet Rodriguez, 31, does not think of herself as black or white, though she has both races in her ancestry. She labels herself Latina or Hispanic or Puerto Rican. “Why should I have to choose?” she says.

Leo Jimenez, 25, is a much-in-demand New York model, who has appeared in ads for companies like Levi’s, DKNY, and Aldo. His steeply raked cheekbones and jet-colored eyes suggest Asian or American Indian ancestry.

In fact, Jimenez is Colombian by birth, a product of the mixed racial heritage of that South American country. He says his melting-pot looks have “definitely opened doors for me.”

Rodriguez and Jimenez are both helping to define a shift in American attitudes about race. With the country’s increasingly multiracial character, especially among the young, more and more Americans are unwilling to see themselves as bound by a single racial category, and Hollywood and Madison Avenue are taking notice.

The changing attitudes about race have led Louis
With help from Hollywood and Madison Avenue, Generation Y is challenging the way America thinks about race and ethnicity.

Vuitton, YSL Beauty, and H&M to highlight models with racially indeterminate features. The popularity of movie stars like Vin Diesel, Lisa Bonet, and Jessica Alba with young audiences seems due in part to the tease over whether they are black, white, Hispanic, American Indian, or some combination. And athletes like Derek Jeter and Tiger Woods may owe part of their appeal to their diverse backgrounds.

"Today what's ethnically neutral, diverse, or ambiguous has tremendous appeal," says Ron Berger, the chief executive of an advertising agency and trend-research company in New York, Euro RSCG MVBMS Partners.

The new attitudes are evident not only in fashion, the media, and entertainment. Nearly 7 million Americans identified themselves as members of more than one race in the 2000 census, the first time respondents were able to check more than one category. In addition, more than 14 million Latinos—about 42 percent of Latino respondents—checked "some other race," an indication, experts say, of the mixed-race heritage of many Hispanics with black, white, and indigenous Indian strains. (Another 48 percent of Hispanics checked white, while 2 percent chose black, and 6 percent selected "more than one race.")

The more fluid way that Americans are viewing their racial identities has stumped the Census Bureau, whose counting of the population and collection of data on Americans every 10 years affects everything from antidiscrimination and voting-rights laws to health and education policy.

ARVOLD BLACK & WHITE

The bureau has surveyed Hispanics to find a way to better pinpoint them racially. As the nation's largest minority group, with 38.8 million members—nearly half of whom are immigrants—Hispanics are helping to drive the redefinition of racial identity. Avoiding the black/white views of many Americans, Hispanics often describe themselves as "moreno," "trigueno," or "indio," terms that indicate ancestry and skin shades that include several hues. Others

wrote in such disparate identities as Mayan (descendants of the Mayan Indian culture of Mexico and Central America) and Tejano (Texans of Mexican descent).

Eva Blanco, 32, a college-admissions official in San Jose, Calif., says she wished there were a census box labeled “red.” “In college, a friend would call me a Mayan princess, because I have the nose you see in the pictures of Mayans,” she says. “I feel there’s nothing that describes my race per se. For the most part, I say I’m Mexican.”

The increasingly multiracial American population, demographers say, is due to intermarriage and waves of immigration. Mixed-race Americans tend to be young—and those younger than 18 were twice as likely as adults to identify themselves as multiracial on the census—helping to make the under-25 members of Generation Y the most racially diverse population in the nation’s history.

‘MY EXOTIC FRIEND’


Yet a multiracial background appears to be a growing advantage for some. For decades, art directors, magazine
We are the new mix,’ says Pedro Freyre, 26, an artist. ‘We are the remix.’

Race in a Race-Obsessed World, says the new malleable views about race began in the 1960s, after legal segregation ended and intermarriage became more common.

“For the first time, the American construct of race is making room for a large group of folks it never made room for before,” says Cose, a contributing editor to Newsweek.

In Los Angeles, Letvia Arza-Goderich, a lawyer, says she and her husband, who are both of Cuban descent, have never discussed with their three sons “whether they are white, or moreno or what,” she says.

Her 16-year-old: Ray, has adopted a hip-hop persona and hangs out with Vietnamese, Indian, Chicano, white, and black friends. Most of them have Asian girlfriends. Another of her sons is into Japanese anime.

“Race takes a back seat to what they listen to on their CD players, what movies they see,” she says.

On a recent evening, Pedro Freyre, 26, an artist of French, Mexican, and Spanish heritage, tried to explain the appeal of “multiethnicity” as he strolled through the streets of downtown Manhattan.

“We are the new mix,” Freyre said, borrowing from the language of the D.J. booth. “We are the remix.”

editors, and casting agents looked for blond-haired, blue-eyed models. People with different ethnic backgrounds were often typecast—consigned to playing stereotyped roles in films and TV. But there is a growing sense that the demand is waning for blond-haired, blue-eyed models.

Diesel, 36, the star of action-adventure films like The Fast and the Furious, once downplayed his multiracial heritage, saying only that his mother is Irish and his father’s background was unknown. But more recently, he has acknowledged that his mixed background has been an asset, allowing him to play all types of roles and ethnicities.

Even megastars like Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera, and Beyoncé Knowles borrow, from time to time, from diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Beyoncé, an African-American, sometimes wears her hair blond; Lopez, who is Puerto Rican, plays a Latina-Asian princess in the latest Louis Vuitton ads, and Christina Aguilera, who is half Ecuadorian, poses on a recent cover of Allure as a star from Bollywood, the term for India’s film industry.

Their willful masquerade reflects a current fascination with the racial hybrid, according to Linda Wells, Allure’s editor in chief, a fascination the magazine does not hesitate to exploit. “Uniformity just isn’t appealing anymore,” she says.