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ENGL 346

Formal Essay, Part II

Essay One Revision

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La Obra Maestra de Colores

**The Vision for Castillo**

Imagine a painting, una obra maestra. The frames están cubierto en oro. La pictura es de una familia en México. There are montañas shaded in morado y rosada with el cielo reflected upon it in rays of luces oscuridades. The clouds that look over the family are cast among the estrellas millones. Even though the painting captures the family in México at night solamente, es la obra más de hermosa. Con la familia y las montañas y las estrellas y la oscuridad, la obra maestra captura los colores de México. Now, tear it from your mind; shred by shred, reveal the color behind the canvas. This terrifying experience which destroys los colores hermosos de la obra maestra is the experience of the Latinos. The gray effect: that is the only color left on the canvas they once identified as home. In the United States, Latinos try to absorb the red, white, and blue, while they also try to absorb el rojo, el blanco, y el verde de su bandera de México. In the end, they are left with the ugly side of the canvas: a blurred mess of gray. ¿Dónde están sus casas ya? Left with no place to call sus casas, Latino colors continue to fade to white.

As someone who also has seen the gray, Ana Castillo addresses the struggle for identity in her piece “The Countryless Woman.” Castillo is a Latina author who understands the struggle of balancing Latina descent with the native-born United Statesian culture. As a Xicana herself, Castillo sets out to avoid the inevitable response to fade into culture, reflecting all colors to outshine the gray; specifically, Castillo wants to expose the diverse palate of her heritage and represent Xicanas to reveal the diversity of such a culture. From feminism and lesbianism to intense ethnic identity and personal emphasis, Castillo pieces la obra maestro back together; she allows the audience to see the color and embrace it, for that color—oscuridad y familia y lengua—is her identity. Moreover, Castillo defines the features of multiple identities that acknowledge both Latino/a heritage and Anglo origins as a foundation to discuss the inherited and even lost features of assimilated identities. As Castillo’s “The Countryless Woman” reveals the consequences of passive assimilation through her discussion of color, language, and gender, she also opens the door for other writers to discuss the role of socioeconomic status in the struggle for identity and acceptance.

**The Latino/a Identities**

As a self-assigned representative of her culture, Castillo reveals the necessity to define one’s own culture; just as in the discussion of la obra meastra de colores, Castillo realizes that Latinos/as should not fade to gray. In fact, she identifies multiple features of her culture that should be identified by the individual: “Color, rather than simply saying ethnicity, in addition to class and gender, as well as *conscientización*, all determine one’s identity and predict’s one’s fate in the United States” (Castillo 29). Nonetheless, color contributes to the identity of Latinos/as because it is the most distinctive feature. In fact, Castillo addresses this feature in her essay as she explains that she “is a mestiza born to the lower strata…a second class citizen…a non-entity…commonly perceived as a foreigner everywhere [she] goes, including the United States and Mexico [as] this international perception is based on [her] color and features” (Castillo 21). Because they are universally identified by their color, Latinos/as hope to extend beyond those stereotypes.

Besides color, language is another defining feature of Latinos/as that cannot be ignored. In fact, language is one of the most controversial features of Latino/a identity and often the most vulnerable to criticism. Even though the Spanish language is the historical feature of Latino/a identity, Latinos/as are forced to acknowledge English as part of their language identity by “having been brought up in an English-dominant society, having attended its monolingual schools, and having been discouraged, in general, from pursuing the language of their ancestors” (Castillo 27). Due to such stress of multiple languages, Latinos/as struggle to identify within the fragmented experience of language. In fact, Castillo actually notes its relation to the Anglo experience in which she claims English as the “disorienting language” (Castillo 26). This sense of distance that exists from Latinos/as’ comfort with English is a clear indication of which language Castillo intends to support in the Latino/a culture.

Beyond color and language, gender is definitely a feature of Latino/a identity that deserves much discussion. Because there are traditionally such distinct roles between men and women in the Latino/a culture, it is important to consider both perspectives. In fact, Castillo introduces this concept of distinct roles between men and women when she states: “While I have more in common with a Mexican man that with a white woman, I have much more in common with an Algerian woman than I do with a Mexican man” (Castillo 23). Clearly, Castillo is driving at the heart of gender differences by claiming her identity with a woman of different ethnicity than claiming identity with a man of the same ethnicity. In fact, she notes that the traditional traits of Latina women—“patience, perseverance, industriousness, loyalty, and commitment—” are “often seen as negative and oppressive to [their] growth as women” (Castillo 40). By offering such shocking assertions, Castillo intends to address the obnoxious identity imposed upon Latinos/as all together. Castillo intends to suggest that Latinas must assert their identity as “strengths.”

While Castillo’s discussion of labor contributions is not as extensive as her discussions of language or gender, she still recognizes the impact of socioeconomic status upon identity and assimilation. Consider Castillo’s discussion as she reveals the position that Latinas especially hold globally: “Serving as mass production drones, non-white women comprise eighty percent of the global factory workforce” (Castillo 24). Even though the world market immensely relies on Latino/a labor, Latinos/as are not given any respect. In fact, Latinos/as are considered to be the “most dispensible resource that multinational interests own” as they are identified as “cheap labor for factories, slaughterhouses, and steel mill industry” (Castillo 24). Even though they should be understood as the most efficient workers, Latinos/as are forced into this position as they aspire to achieve the “American Dream” promised by the same people who consider them dispensible. As Castillo notes these horrifying facts, she raises the issue that Latinos/as must assert more than just their language and gender; they must also assert their power for socioeconomic status.

**The Assimilation Conflict**

As the features of Latino/a identity are revealed, it is clear that Castillo is addressing the passivity of both Latinos/as and Anglos. Beyond just identifying core Latino/a features, she subtly reveals the ways in which those features of identity are diluted in the effort to assume some of the features of Anglo identity. In fact, Castillo exemplifies this dissolving experience as she describes the event in which a Latina women ventures downtown Chicago on Michigan Avenue, the heart of Midwest Anglo-United Statesian culture: “Once there she went about her business with a certain sense of invisibility, and even hoped for it, feeling so out of place and disorientated in the presence of U.S. Anglo, profit-based interests” (Castillo 25). In this particular situation, similar to most intimidating experiences Latinos/as encounter, the Latina woman is no longer present; her existence is too easily compromised as the Anglo-dominant features consume her. This experience is known as passive assimilation–-the experience Castillo intends to address and eliminate. In fact, such passive assimilation that Latinos/as encounter today can be understood from the dominion of the United States colonial period (Augenbraum and Olmos xiv). Consider the United States today as an imitation of the European rule of the Americas; as the indigenous population was once considered inferior‎ly savage by the Europeans in order to rationalize their political domination and cultural hegemony, so, too, today the Anglo-United Statesians dominate in rationalization of their own perspective. Establishing such an institution leaves no other choice then but to assimilate. For instance, consider that “Mexico encourages the emigration of labor force to alleviate its own depressed economy as the United States all too willingly consumes this labor without giving it the benefits enjoyed by U.S. residents” (Castillo 37). By this fact, Castillo reveals that, through such passive assimilation, Latinos/as will gain some features yet ultimately lose the most important—the true consequence.

While it may seem contradictory to the plight Castillo intends to expose, there are evident features of assimilation that have been and can be adopted by Latinos/as; in fact, the most notable features to inherit include the: “American Dream,” nationalism, and government acknowledgement. Even though those features are understood to be “inherited” during assimilation, it is important to consider that assimilation does not exactly gurantee these adopted features as they do not directly correspond with its implications. For example, the “American Dream” that Latinos/as often “inherit” is simply the state of dreaming. Castillo expands on this concept as she describes her encounter with another Latina: “Don’t look at me. Go on your way. Let me go on pretending my invisibility, so that I can observe close up all the possibilities—and dream the gullible dreams” (Castillo 26). Clearly, Castillo realizes that there will never be a fulfillment of such dreams so long as she is invisible, so the dreams are merely a facade that give her hope in a life that seems so destructive. Other facades that are just as likely “inherited” and destructive as the “American Dream” is nationalism and government acknowledgement. While it may seem that assimilating to the Anglo culture that dominates the nation benefits Latinos/as, it, in fact, does not. Castillo actually addresses this double standard of nationalism and benefits: “Many [Latina] women born in the United States or brought here during childhood have little connection with the country…[they] flounder between invisibility and a tacit hope that [they] might be accepted here and awarded the benefits of acculturation” (Castillo 38). Unfortunately, this hope and dream that Castillo addresses is not often a tangible possibility. Even as benefits were implemented just to correct the initial misuse of unconcented sterilization and psychological damage (Castillo 25), by the time the government implemented benefits to facilitate the “health, education, and wealth” of Latinos/as, it was immediately retracted (Castillo 31). So even as inherited features initially seem like positive outcomes of assimilation, it is clear that they are just a façade – a double standard that Latinos/as are left to shred from la obra hermosa. Moreover, Castillo underlines that this sense of loss will always be present unless attitudes change.

**The Response to Assimilation**

In reaction to the identities of passive Latinos/as, it should be understood that assimilation is ineffective—limited, unproductive, and unreliable; after all, the idea that assimilation is ineffective is the heart of Castillo’s work. To suggest that passive assimilation is limited is to suggest that by its nature Latinos/as will not have the true “American Dream,” whereas with force “there is today a visible sector of Latinos/as who are college degreed, who have mortgages on decent houses, and who are articulate in English” (Castillo 31). To suggest that passive assimilation is unproductive is to suggest that by its nature Latinos/as will not have a voice, wheras with assertive energy “they may feel that they are not forced to forfeit an important part of their personal identity and find acceptability by white society” (Castillo 39). To suggest that passive assimilation is unreliable is to suggest that by its nature Latinos/as will not have a mind of their own, whereas with focus “even those who are not as outwardly identifiably Mexican yet usually so inheritantly Mexican by tradition are not able to fully assimilate” (Castillo 25). Recognizing these negative patterns of passive assimilation is a clear reason to avoid it; after all, there is not a future in a culture that cannot assert its presence within and a part of a diverse world.

As means to avoid passive assimilation and a non-existent future, consider transculturation. Since the search for “authenticity entails a cultural remapping and renaming that will ultimately benefit not only Latinos/as and other minority groups but the entire society” (Augenbraum and Olmos xx), then transculturation is a perfect solution to combine both features. In the modern understanding of the Latino/a movement, Gabriela Ventura’s *U.S. Latino Literature Today* supports transculturation as a solution. In fact, Ventura suggests that transculturation allows Latinos/as to maintain their heritage while participating in everyday life in the United States because “people of all cultures in the world live in U.S. territories, and, although not all cultures are allowed to participate equally, they are present and in many ways reshape U.S. culture” (Ventura 181). Therefore, no matter the exact integration of culture an ethnicity asserts, it is still inevitably reshaping U.S. culture as a whole. For that reason, I believe that Latinos/as can and should assert their identity. Whether through negotiations they choose “to execute this task through voice” (Ventura 183) or they even “create identities that facilitate their accommodation and enable them to keep strong ties with their own countries although they live in Anglo-American environment” (Ventura 181), Latinos/as should take advantage of the methods writers have offered them. No longer apathetic to la obra meastra de colores, Latinos/as deben ultizar los colores de sus obras y pintan sus obras maestras. Con la ayuda de nuestras profesores—Castillo, Augenbraum and Olmos, y Ventura—nosotros ya tenemos un futuro—un futuro hermoso con todos los colores de las banderas.

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