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Formal Essay, Part I

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La Obra Maestra de Colores

**The Vision for Anzaldúa and 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 to 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 sus segundas banderas 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 no place to call sus casas, Latinos continue to let their colors bleed and stain the place left behind.

From someone who also has seen the gray, Gloria Anzaldúa’s addresses the struggle for home in her piece *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa is a Latina author who understands the struggle of balancing Latina descent with the native-born United Statesian culture. As a Mestiza herself, Anzaldúa sets to avoid the innate response to bleed into culture, extracting all colors to assume the gray; specifically, Anzaldúa wants to expose the diverse palate of her heritage and represent Mestizos to reveal the diversity of such a culture. From feminism and lesbianism to intense ethnic identity and personal emphasis, Anzaldúa targets and exploits the misconceptions of the Mestizo culture throughout her piece (Fernández 445); she invites the audience to recognize her Mestizo culture and embrace it. Anzaldúa 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. Along with Gloria Anzaldúa and her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Xicana author Ana Castillo effectively captures the impact of balancing multiple identities. Specifically, Castillo defines the features of multiple identities that acknowledge both Latino heritage and Anglo origins as a foundation to discuss the inherited and even lost features of assimilated identities. Yet rather than communicating with just her Chicana culture, Ana Castillo of “The Countryless Woman” directly addresses both Anglo and Latino apathetics--who ignore or even deny their heritage--so as to reveal the true consequences of passive assimilation and the unforeseeable future that will not exist unless the diverse and self-empowered people claim it.

**The Latino Identities**

As the self-assigned representative of her culture, Castillo reveals the necessity to define one’s own culture; just like the discussion of la obra meastra de colores, Castillo realizes that Latinos 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). While Castillo does reveal the prominent features of Latino identity, it is important to consider that Latino identity extends beyond color and gender; beyond color, Latino identity involves geography, labor contribution, gender and sexual orientation, and language. For the sake of understanding the assimilation that can occur from such distinct features of Latino identity, it is important to consider these features first.

*Color*

Color contributes to the identity of Latinos 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 amd features” (Castillo 21). Because they are universally identified by their color, Latinos hope to extend beyond those stereotypes and identify themselves with the physical geography to which they belong as the foundation to their existence.

*Geography*

With geographical identity in mind, Latinos call for “‘remapping of cultural terrain’” and demand for a “‘deterritorialization of the mainstream’ in order to eliminate ‘psychic dislocations and the cultural marginalization of those on the periphery’” (Fernández xi). Clearly, Latinos are concerned with their identity as a sense of geographic restraint. This sense of restraint is also present in Castillo’s discussion of Latino identity in which she states: “If in search of refuge from the Unites States I took up residence on any other continent, the core of my being would long for a return to the land of my ancestors. My ethereal spirit and my collective memory with other indigenas and mestizo/as yearn to claim these territories as homeland” (Castillo 21). Identifying herself outside of the United States with her “homeland” suggests that she is restrained to reside in the United States while she yearns to live in her “homeland;” in fact, she is so consumed by this restraint that she perceives herself as Mexican (Castillo 24). In relation to the impact of geography upon identity, the identity of Latinos are also influenced by their labor contributions.

*Labor Contributions*

Labor contributions are a prominent feature of Latino identity. Even though it may not seems as prominent as the color of their skin, labor contributions are actually a distinctive feature of Latinos. Consider Castillo’s discussion as she reveals the position Latinos hold globally: “serving as mass production drones, non-white women comprise eighty percent of the global factory workforce” (Castillo 24). While it is not considered an honor to be the drones of the global workforce, it is a feature of identity that Latinos are defined by. In fact, these Latinas are considered to be the “most dispensible resource that multinational interests own,” even though they should be understood as the most efficient workers. Overlooking the quality of contribution Latinos offer, they are simply identified as “cheap labor for factories, slaughterhouses, and steel mill industry” (Castillo 24). Identified as “the least valued” and of an image that only gets “worse,” Latinos turn to gender as another feature of their identity that hopes to receive more praise (Castillo 24).

*Gender*

Gender is definitely a feature of Latino identity that deserves much discussion. Because there are such distinct roles between men and women of the Latino culture, it is important to consider both perspectives. In fact, Castillo introduces this concept of distinct roles between men and women in which 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. To further emphasize the identity that Latinos must face, Castillo exemplifies the demeaning position of Latina women as she explains that the increasing population of Latinos was once justified by the inaccurate interpretation of advanced fertility of Latina women over the fertility of Anglo women (Castillo 27). In any case, this sense of gender is the feature Latinos are to identify with.

*Language*

The last feature of Latino identity important to consider in Catillo’s address to apathetic Latinos and Anglos is language. Besides color, language is another defining feature of Latinos that cannot be ignored. In fact, language is one of the most controversial features of Latino identity and often the most vulnerable to criticism. To suggest its importance to the identity of Latinos, 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’ comfort with Spanish is a clear indication of which language is more identifiable with their culture. Even though the Spanish language is the true feature of Latino identity, they are forced to acknowledge English as part of their language identity as well since “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 the stress of multiple languages, it must be considered that Latinos are identified through their language.

**The Assimilation Process**

As the features of Latino identity are revealed, it is clear that Castillo is addressing the Latino and Anglo apathetics. Beyond just identifying these features, she subtly reveals the ways in which these features of identity are diluting into the features of Anglo identity. In fact, Castillo exemplifies this dissolving experience as she describes the event in which a Latina women ventures downtown—the heart of Anglican 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 encounter, the Latina woman is no longer present; her existence disappears as she allows the Anglo features to consume her. This experience is known as passive assimilation–-the experience Castillo addresses and intends to eliminate among apathetic Latinos and Anglos. Whether assimilation is understood as the imitation of European rule of the Americas in which the indigenous population was considered inferior‎ly savage so as to rationalize European political domination and cultural hegemony (Fernández xiv) or the economic understanding 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), it is important to consider that in any case there will be features inherited and lost. Castillo utilizes this sense of inherited and lost features of identity so as to reveal the consequences of such apathetic and passive action.

*Inherited Features*

While it may seem contradictory to the plight Castillo intends to expose, there are evident features of assimilation that have been and can be inherited by Latinos; in fact, the most notable features to inherit include the: “American dream,” nationalism, and government acknowledgement. Even those features are understood to be “inherited” during assimilation, it is important to consider that assimilation does not exactly gurantee these inherited features as these features do not directly correspond with its implications. For example, the “American dream” that Latinos “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 deconstructive. Other facades that are just as likely “inherited” and deconstructive 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, 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 even 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, it was immediately retracted (Castillo 31). So even as inherited features initially seem like positive outcomes to assimilation, it is clear that it is just a façade – a double standard that Latinos are left to shred from la obra hermosa.

*Lost Features*

The discussion of the façade that the inherited features lead to relates to the physical features that are lost during assimiliation; as it is the intent and purpose of Castillo to address the negative consequences of assimilation, she specifically addresses the losses associated with assimilation. Among the features of identity that are lost, the most prominent losses include: character, language, and basic needs and rights. To address the concept of lost character, it is important to consider that assimilation requires the passive acquisition of features innate to the Latinos as well as to Anglos. In this case, just as Castillo explains, there exists a imbalanced character. In fact, Castillo identifies this deconstruction: “To compound [Latino] anxiety over [their] foreign-like identity in the United States, Mexican Americans are also not generally accepted in México…[they] are either among the traitors or trash of Mexico” (Castillo 39). Beyond this rejection of character both in the United States and in Mexico, Latinos also face rejection of their physical needs and even tongue. Whether the deconstruction of the Latina self is not enough so far as the “Southwest retains [her] native tongue” (Castillo 27) or the desparation for assimilation is present to the extent that “spiritual and psychological needs are so despised and undesired” (Castillo 25), then assimilation will continue to cause loss among Latino identity. It is evident from Castillo’s discussion that there is no distinct gain from assimilation, just loss. 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 apathetic Latinos and Anglos along with their passive assimilation, 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, without force, Latinos will not have the true “American dream:” “Because of the [Chicano/Latino Movement] there is today a visible sector of Latinos 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, without assertive agency, Latinos will not have a voice: “If [Latinos] have no or little facility in Spanish, they may feel that they are forced to forfeit an important part of their personal identity and still never to find acceptability by white society” (Castillo 39). To suggest that passive assimilation is unreliable is to suggest that, without focus, Latinos will not have a mind of their own: “Even those who are not as outwardly identifiably Mexican are usually so inheritantly Mexican by tradition that they 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.

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 and other minority groups but the entire society” (Fernández xx), then transculturation is a perfect solution to combine both features. In the modern understanding of the Latino movement, Gabriela Ventura’s *U.S. Latino Literature Today* supports transculturation as a solution. In fact, Ventura suggests that transculturation allows Latinos 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 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 should take advantage of the methods authors have offered them. No longer apathetic to la obra meastra de colores, Latinos deben ultizar los colores de sus obras y pinta sus obras maestras. Con la ayuda de sus profesores—Anzaldúa, Castillo, Fernández, y Ventura—Latinos ya tienen un futuro—un futuro hermoso.

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