Brandy Bailey

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Formal Essay, Part II

Essay Two

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La Obra Maestra de Colores

**The Vision for Castillo and Díaz**

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/as. The gray effect: that is the only color left on the canvas they once identified as home. In the United States, Latinos/as 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/a 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 Latino/a literature like Junot Díaz’s *Negocios* 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 addition to color and language, it is important to consider gender because there are traditionally such distinct roles between men and women in the Latino/a culture. 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. 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 color, language, and 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.

Díaz’s *Negocios* expands Castillo’s discussion of labor contributions as it reinforces the role of socioeconomic status upon identity and assimilation. Just like Castillo addresses the inevitable aspiration to achieve the “American Dream,” Díaz also reveals this concept in his *Negocios*. Consider the dialogue Díaz prompts between Papi and Chuito about a job that Chuito offers: “For that you get a salary and free rent. That’s the kind of job worth having. The towns nearby are quiet, lots of good gringos…out of the city, safe…a nice easy job” (Díaz 195). While this job is offered to Papi, it is still just a dream job—a job much different from his real job. Díaz emphasizes this point as he allows Ramón to describe the conditions of his father’s *real* job. For example, Ramón explains that his father’s job “was nearly a two-hour commute, followed by a day of tendon-riping labor…the racism was pronounced…the whites were always dumping their bad shifts on him and…[he] knew better than to speak up” (Díaz 194). Clearly, the conditions of this job are much more straining than Papi had hoped for, and he can’t do much about it since the Anglos dominate the business; this is a common experience that many Latinos/as can identify with. Even worse, Latinos/as are often forced to work two jobs before they can reach such a job that Papi attains by the end of the story. Díaz reveals this struggle in his description of Papi’s jobs, cleaning offices and washing dishes: “[Papi] worked nineteen-, twenty-hour days, seven days a week. Out in the cold he coughed explosively, feeling as if his lungs were tearing open from the force of his exhales and in the kitchens the heat from the ovens sent pain corkscrewing into his head. He was so tired from working that…he had to bite his lip to stay awake” (Díaz 178). With such vivid description, it is clear that Díaz is stemming from the true Latino/a experience of struggling to achieve stable labor. As much as Latinos/as contribute to labor, Díaz reveals that the conditions won’t respect their work unless they assert agency.

Along with labor contributions, the discussion of wealth reflects Díaz’s focus of socioeconomic status upon identity and assimilation; as wealth is a driving force in the Anglo-American culture, Díaz reveals the vulnerability of Latinos/as to such a value. Consider the way in which Díaz trails Papi throughout the story. As Papi begins his journey in the United States, it is evident that even the costs for survival is too expensive: “Neither [job] paid enough and the cost of the living room floor was too great…he spent five minutes stepping on [roaches] and shaking them from his mattress before dropping into his cot” (Díaz 173, 179). Clearly, Díaz reveals the struggle that many Latinos/as face when moving to the United States; as they begin to find work, Latinos/as aren’t able to live under the conditions that jobs are supposed to promise in the United States. Even as Latinos/as move forward in the job market, gathering more than two or three jobs, they still aren’t able to benefit from the jobs as dreamed. A perfect example of this experience is Díaz’s description of Papi’s and Jo-Jo’s method of transportation in which Papi “walked in his bad shoes, hitch[ing] rides from truckers,” and Jo-Jo, “despite his prosperity, could not drive and did not own a car” (Díaz 173, 192). As unfortunate as it is, the Latinos/as in the story are a pure example of Latinos/as today; they can’t even afford to drive a car if money allowed since they don’t have the time to learn how to drive. As the story progresses, Díaz further opens the issue of wealth and its overwhelming position upon Latinos/as through Ramón’s description of his father’s visit to Santo Domingo: “He felt like a tourist, riding a guagua to Boca Chica and having his and Nilda’s photograph taken in front of the Alcázar de Colón. He was obliged to eat two or three times a day; he was, after all, the new successful husband from the North” (Díaz 198). The fact that Papi is considered wealthy in the perspective of his native country yet is really just working class in the United States reveals the struggle Díaz intends to convey—Latinos/as are stuck in the overwhelming position between the comfort of wealth in their native country, eating multiple hearty meals a day, and the low status that the value of money in the United States casts upon them, scraping roaches off their backs. Fixed under the perspective of both eyes, Díaz drives at the struggle many Latinos/as face as they attempt to identify their fragmented experience of money.

**The Assimilation Conflict**

As the features of Latino/a identity are revealed, it is clear that Castillo and Díaz are addressing the passivity of both Latinos/as and Anglos. Beyond just identifying core Latino/a features, they subtly reveal 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 woman 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 and Díaz intend to address and eliminate. In fact, such passive assimilation that Latinos/as encounter today can be understood from Díaz’s portrayal of Latino/a-immigrant family struggles (Friedman 82). Specifically, as Papi begins his life in the United States, it is evident that his value of family is pushed aside (even further), and his respect for family lessens; in fact, even though his intention was to support his family, it isn’t long before Papi completely disregards his family values as he succumbs to the dominant-capitalism values—“a desire far greater than his desire for his wife or his lover” (Friedman 82). While there is obvious fault that Papi is responsible for, there is the factor to consider that he is subjected to legal and economic conditions that cause for his disparity for money (Friedman 82). Since legal and economic conditions are so harsh that Papi has to “commit the greatest marital transgression…marrying fraudulently a Dominican American woman” just to get citizenship, then Papi cannot be entirely blamed for such assimilation (Friedman 82). Clearly, if Latinos/as cannot even gain acknowledgment in the presence of the government, then they are left wih no other choice but to assimilate. At most, Latinos/as can get the right to be on the United States’ soil, but that doesn’t mean they will get the recognition or rights that they are looking for. By this fact, Castillo and Díaz reveal 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 these Latino/a writers intend 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. Díaz expands on this concept as he allows Ramón to describe his father: “Papi wanted a negocio of his own…that leap was what he envisioned for himself, not some slow upward crawl through the mud. What it would be and when it would come, he did not know” (Díaz 190-191). Clearly, Díaz allows Ramón to realize that there will never be a fulfillment of such dreams so long as his father is tied by the island. Therefore, the dreams are merely a facade that give Latinos/as 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 and Díaz underline 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 and Díaz’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 “there is a conscious effort to find hope and possibility in new understandings for helping to read and write as consciously historicized individuals” (Gutiérrez 155). 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 one can “save some money and buy a little business…and buy a nice house and start branching out” (Díaz 190). 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, Díaz, Friedman, Gutiérrez, Augenbraum y Olmos, y Ventura—nosotros ya tenemos un futuro—un futuro hermoso con todos los colores de las banderas.

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