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Narrative: Assimilation or Integration?

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Abstract. The works of minority authors are often referred to as "assimilation narrative," although it is very often not assimilation that they seek. They strive to find a place in mainstream society, without giving up their ethnic-cultural-religious backround—in other words, they wish to get *integrated,* rather than *assimilated*. They regret when *assimilation* takes place, when they finally have to leave their cultural roots behind, and they try to postpone it as much as they can. Ethnic authors, immigrant writers fully understand that the members of minorities, new immigrants wish to get integrated, as in this way they are able to enjoy the advantages a highly industrialized country with high living standards is able to offer. But most ethnic authors do not believe that for integration they always and inevitably need to abandon and give up their ethnic, cultural and religious roots. It is therefore justified to introduce the term "integration narrative" to denote writings the authors of which are against assimilation, while they look for a possibility of meaningful participation in mainstream society. For the essay, examples from Hispanic American literature will be used. Authors who reject and those who accept assimilation are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: assimilation/integration narrative, Hispanic literature in America

1. Introduction

In literary theory and literary history the works of (ethnic) minority authors—and similarly, the works of authors dealing with minorities—are often

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referred to as "assimilation narrative." This term tends to suggest that the works of minority authors produced in the language of the majority of the people living in the country concerned seek a place in society through assimilation. Assimilation, however, means melting up in the majority nation by adopting all the values, customs and way of life characteristic of the majority, and abandoning, leaving behind, giving up the original traditional values, ethics, lifestyle, religion etc. of the minority. Assimilation means disappearing without a trace, continuing life as a new person, with new values, language, a whole set of new cultural assets. In this paper an effort is made to show that this is in fact *not* what many of the ethnic minority writers look for, so the term *assimilation narrative* is in many, although certainly not all, the cases is erroneuosly applied.

What many minority authors—prose writers as well as playwrights and poets—seek and expect from the majority society is a chance for *integration*. From their point of view, integration is a lot more positive term, as it suggests the possibility for active participation in the life of society. It does not involve the abandonment of their original cultural heritage, but offers the advantages of participating in the life of the country.

Examples to illustrate the necessity of differentiating between *assimilation* and *integration* when labelling minority writings will be taken from the works of Chicano—Mexican American—authors. It is, naturally, possible to obtain similar instances from the literature of other minorities of the United States and/or other countries, but for constraints of space, the examples will be limited to the literature of Chicanos in this paper.

2. Politicians, assimilation, integration

For politicians, the situation is simple. Majority politicians often urge and encourage assimilation, as they tend to regard the demands, expectations and special needs of ethnic minorities as some sort of an extra political, cultural and economic burden. The number of majority politicians who look upon minorities as a cultural and economic resource for the entire country is usually smaller. Minority politicians are divided sharply according to whether they support or reject assimilation. Those who support it, usually argue that success in professions and business, as well as the chances of personal advancement are all subject to perfect linguistic and cultural adaptation, the unconditional acceptance of the entire value system of the majority. Linda Chávez, a prominent neo-conservative politician adds to these arguments the idea that emergence from poverty, the escape route from the slums—or the *barrios,* as the poverty-stricken areas populated by Hispanics are called—leads through assimilation. Chávez is an influential neo-conservative theoretician, who had been selected for the position of Secretary of Labor in George W. Bush's government, but did not occupy the position because it

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turned out that she employed an undocumented immigrant as a house servant. Chávez condemns that

> The purpose [of American schools] is not to assimilate Hispanic children, . . . but to maintain and strengthen their ethnic identity by teaching them in their native language and by inculcating in them in their native culture. In the process, these children have become the most segregated students in American public schools, kept apart from their English-speaking peers even after they have acquired basic English skills . . . (9)

The quotation is from the chapter of the book, entitled "*The Bilingual Battleground*." Expressions such as "battleground" indicate Chávez's firm commitment to the issue of assimilation. For Chávez, education in their own culture impedes Mexicans in achieving full success in American civilization. Non-Hispanic politicians often use even more powerful expressions. Rosa Martha Villareal quotes the words of Tom Tancredo (representative for Colorado), who believes "that the culture of Latin American immigrants (especially Mexicans) threaten the very nature of American civilization" (Villareal, "Clashes of Civilization Stereotypes"). Tancredo's words imply that Latin American culture in general, and Mexican in particular, is not American at all. The politician does not bother to explain what it is then; he continues the nineteenth-century tradition to suggest that Mexicans debase and defile the allegedly wholesome and sound Anglo-Saxon civilization of the United States.

Minority politicians who reject assimilation, usually refer to the traditional cultural heritage of their own people, and intend to reinforce the national identity of their people. They believe that political organization is a way of asserting their own interests in the country: "In 1966 Senator Joseph Montoya (D-NM) told a group of Mexican Americans that if they would organize, work together, and, above all, register and vote, they could become one of the most politically potent groups in the United States" (Gómez-Quiñones 102).

The 1960s also witnessed the emergence of the Chicano Movement, led by César Chávez. Although Chávez carefully planned his actions as an agricultural movement, the symbols they used and the sheer number of people who joined him made it clear right at the beginning that it was going to be a lot more than the expression of the dissatisfaction of a handful of California farmworkers. The movement did a lot for organizing Chicanos and to improve the ability of the Mexican minority to resist assimilation.

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3. Narrative: assimilation or integration

In literature, the borderline between those who support assimilation and those who seek integration is not always so clearcut, and the proportion of the two parties are also different. Authors are usually intellectuals who are rooted deeply in their own culture and traditions, unwilling to give it all up, but are also able to see the chances offered by a wealthy, industrialized society will all the advantages it has to offer. They are therefore largely in favor of *integration*, and not of *assimilation.*

One of the first classic novels of Chicano literature is *Bless Me, Última* by Rudolfo Anaya. The novel is summed up briefly by Shirley and Shirley in the following way: "[it] is concerned with the maturation of a young boy . . . and his relationship with his spiritual guide, the Última of the title. She is a *curandera,* a wise woman, a dispenser of curing herbs and potions who also heals with spiritual advice and some 'magic'" (105).

Anaya wanted to write a novel about his own people, about the traditional values of his own community. The world is the closed, relatively well-protected world of the family, where people know their place and the community takes care of them. Nobody is left alone when too old or ill to take care of himself or herself: "Gabriel, we cannot let her live her last days in loneliness . . ." "'No,'" my father agreed. 'It is not the way of our people'" (3).The mother, whose ages-old task is keeping up the family and preserving its integrity at all times, initiates steps to receive somebody in need, and the father agrees. After all, that is "the way of our people." The importance of family ties as a central point in the value system of the Chicanos is made clear in the very first pages of the book. It is in this environment that young Antonio grows up. In addition to family bonds, religion is also a central part in the life of the community. Antonio even finds it difficult to accept Christian faith and Última's alleged powers as a witch at the same time. Finally he finds satisfaction in believing that both religion and Última's witchcraft serve good purposes.

The question of assimilation does not arise here, as the outside world is a distant place, the characters of the novel are rarely exposed to it. Still, a distant menace of an alien, unknown world is there somewhere far outside, so many of the Chicanos decide not to live in the town, but to spend most of their time out the range, riding freely as long as they can continue this way of life. Attempts at finding a way to the new world are not very successful. Such an occassion is when the boys go to school. They expect a lot from it, but when they realize that not much attention is paid to the specific needs of Chicanos, and therefore education was not the same thing to them as to Anglos, they are no longer really interested. The circumstance that Antonio was not very deeply integrated in the school life of the Anglos—in fact, he was ejected by the system—made it easier for him to grow up to be a man within his own original world, in the traditions of his people. As he

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grows older, he shoulders more and more responsibility, and he is accepted as a grown-up man, a reliable and respected man of his community. He is not integrated in the Anglo society, but nor is assimiliated to any degree. The system allowed him to do neither. Anaya's novel was published in 1972 to become one of the most widely known and best-selling Chicano literary works. Another novel that rapidly received great acclaim is *Always Running–La Vida Loca: Gang Days in Los Angeles* by Luis Rodriguez. His work was published two decades after Anaya's work. This is also the story of a young boy's way to maturity, but the differences between the two novels are as great as the similarities. Rodriguez's novel is based upon his own life, and he received prizes for *non-fiction.* In his novel there is no wise magician to assist the hero on his way—he has to run his own race, and there are in fact very few who help him. There are many more of those who work against him directly or indirectly.

One of the characters who always support young Luis without reservations is his mother. The mother in Rodriguez's novel matches the traditional Chicana mother who, against all difficulties, financial and other, keeps the family together. She is, however, not the romantic beauty with the raven-black hair, often found in stereotypical images of Mexican women:

> Mama always seemed to be sick. . . . she was overweight and suffered from . . . diabetes. She had thyroid problems, bad nerves and high blood pressure. She was still young then . . . in her thirties, but she had all the ailments. She didn't even have teeth; . . . Despite this she worked all the time, . . . and held up the family when almost everything else came apart. (23)

The last sentence is particularly important, as Mama, with her ability to keep the family together, will be one of the cyclically returning images throughout the whole novel, until Rodriguez will at the end be able to offer his own positive experience to his son.

Women described in novels and short stories offen suffer under a double burden: one is the generally underprivileged situation of the Chicanos, and the other is the lack of a man—a husband, a father of their children, a permanent partner, a wage earner—in the family. In this situation the mother becomes what Charles Ramirez Berg describes as follows:

> The naive, good-natured, long-suffering mother, . . . is the norm . . . and the typical way ethnic mothers are portrayed in Hollywood movies in general. In the assimilation narrative the mother figure serves as the font of genuine ethnic values and the protagonist's (and the narrative's) cultural conscience. When the hero listens to 'his people' he is listening to his mother. (38)

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Berg is discussing traditional Mexican family values in connection with movies, but his observations are applicable to literature as well. These values are described by Harry H. L. Kitano as follows:

> The women are expected to cook, raise the children, and serve the needs of the men. Male and female roles tend to be clearly proscribed; masculinity (*machismo)* is of great importance, even outside marriage. The family remains the most important unit; close relationships outside the family are mostly with age peers. (139)

The *barrio* was a place that distorted many of the basic values of the Chicanos. Such was *máchismo.* Originally, *máchismo* used to mean that men were allowed to have relationship with other women outside marriage, it was in fact a sign of their masculinity, but most of them did not desert their families, they supported and provided for wife and children. In the *barrio,* masculine pride for grown-up men often meant that they had many children from many different women, but they did not care much about the children or the women. But when the father is present, he has not deserted the family, the mother is usually described in the same way. Somehow, the role of the father is different, and from the aspect of the daily life and work of the family, the problems of the children, the father is an unimportant character, hovering somewhere in the background, on the peripheries of the story.

For a young man, identification with a gang began to replace identification with a family. A *barrio* is not rural or small-town America, where the betrayal of the family was the gravest crime, the punishment for which was contempt or even death. Here one could easily desert his family, and survive.

For young people the lack of any sexual education meant that introduction into sexual life was often a painful and frustrating experience. The naturalistic description of such scenes in the book indicate that this experience was very often not romantic, what is more, often disappointing for many young people—both girls and boys—who were frequently barely older than a young child.

The *barrio,* while distorts traditional values, also acts like a trap several times, whenever somebody appears to have a chance of breaking out, the *barrio* with its misery, deprivation, prejudice and petty crime prevents him or her from succeeding. But the first thing—and one of the most important—that we learn about the *barrio* is that it is not exclusively a Spanish-speaking community. There are other nationalities there as well, because poverty is just as important a fact in bringing people to the *barrio* as nationality:

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> . . . large numbers of Asians from Japan, Korea and Taiwan also moved into the area. Sections of Monterey Park and even San Gabriel became known as Little Japans or Chinatowns. . . . The barrios which were not incorporated . . . became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion. (Rodriguez 40-41)

"Incorporated" means that a town has its own public services and utilities and normal housing conditions—middle-class, as opposed to the slums of the immigrants.

Another recurrent image—or rather event—is the drop-out of school. The drop-out is usually the end of a hopeless, or sometimes not completely hopeless, effort to catch up with the mainstream society. The drop-out of school has more tragic consequences for Luis than it was for Antonio in Anaya's novel. The *barrio* Luis lives in is deeply embedded in a big city, and any chance of finding a decent job and earning a middle-class salary is good education. Luis is not growing up in his own community, relatively isolated from an unfriendly and not receptive but remote mainstream America. A similarly hindering factor is police harassment—Chicanos are often subject to arbitrary and excessively rude police action. Police action is, however, a highly controversial issue in the novel. Young Luis's life is spent in a way a natural part of which is petty crime—burglary, mugging, theft and street fighting. Still, police action is not regarded by the *pachucos* as an act of law enforcement and a retaliation for something that is not right—it always remains harassment, the sole reason for which is racial. This is the case on page 95, when they mug a group of youngsters, and the police appears on the scene:

> They started to run, but we surrounded them and forced them to fork over some bills. As they ran off, Lencho kicked one of them in the ass. . . .
> We turned and walked down Hellman Avenue. Suddenly a Monterey Park police car drove by and stopped. Two uniformed officers rushed out.
> 'Hold it right there,' one of them ordered. This became routine with us. Whenever the people from the Hill made it down to Monterey . . ., the police departments . . . made a habit to roust us out. (Rodriguez 95)

Rodriguez does not explain what he thinks about interrelation between poverty and petty crime, but he described the risks of this way of life, as he tells several stories when, as a child, he was very close to committing a murder, thus becoming a serious offender. Explanation comes later in the novel:

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> ‘You stole from me. You have to pay for it.’
> ‘I don’t mind that. The problem is we end up paying more for the same thing than other people do. On this side of town, the cops don’t beat up people. On this side of town, the cops don’t stop you for no reason. They don’t be hitting you in the head, trying to make you mad so you do something you regret later.’ (144)

At school most Chicano boys and girls do not have an adequate preliminary education, they very often struggle with the language, and even when they are juvenile criminals, they are offended that they are treated as juvenile criminals. At these passages Rodriguez does not make any comments and does not suggest any solution, apart from the fully justified complaint that the educational authorities did not provide for proper Spanish-language education. The fact that for decades nothing really happened in recognition of the educational needs of one of the largest ethnic groups in America, affords a rather sad image of the woeful shortcomings of the American educational system. In fact, providing for adequate Spanish education would have been just one possible solution. Paying more attention to teaching English with special and effective methodology to those whose mother tongue was different, could have been another way of addressing the problem, but this apparently did not happen either. It seems that for decades (Anglo-)American school boards and police departments behaved as if they had believed that the presence of “foreigners” in their country was a transitory phenomenon. They believed that all they had to do was wait, and these people would disappear, and all the social, educational and other problems with them, relieving the majority society of all obligation to do something for them. On top of page 120 of the novel Luis is glad that he is fired from school—at the bottom of the page he regrets that he has to do a dirty and humiliating job.

> Those of us still in school were expelled. This was fine with me. I hated school. And I loved fighting.
> I worked as a bus boy in a Mexican restaurant in San Gabriel when I was 15 years old. . . . It was kicking, hard work. . . . We carried thick plastic trays heaped with dirty dishes, cleaned up tables, poured water into glasses, provided extra coffee—and took abuse from the well-to-do people who came there.
> ‘Hey boy, clean up this mess.’
> ‘Hey boy, how about some more water.’
> Hey Boy became my new name. (Rodriguez 120)

At similar scenes Rodriguez does not provide his own comments or explanations—when he was 15, it was “fine with him” to be expelled from school,

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and did not understand that lack of education was equal to getting nothing but dirty jobs. What made it especially difficult for him to understand this was the generally hostile atmosphere, the prejudice that deprived them of equal opportunities at schools. There are two factors in the novel that finally pushed Rodriguez towards the first efforts at finding some sort of a solution to his apparently hopeless life. One is the absolutely senseless violence of the gang warfare. We find abundant descriptions of violence and destruction in the novel:

> Things soon exploded. More cops came but they too were pelted. A major confrontation erupted . . . Soon the police pulled out. The ambulance took Carlitos and sped off, but not before receiving a barrage of rocks, bottles and debris. We assumed that more police and firepower were coming. (Rodriguez 96)

In order to become a member of a gang, one has to undergo a similarly cruel "inauguration" ritual. The ritual has its own choreography, the players know their parts, and the preparations have, in their own grotesque and bizarre way, some dignity. But the reader will soon forget that, when reads lines like these:

> Topo swung a calloused fist at my face. I went down fast. Then an onslaught of steel-tipped shoes and heels rained on my body. I thought I would be able to swing and at least hit one or two–but no way! Then I . . . pulled my arms over my head, covered it the best I could while the kicks seemed to stuff me beneath a parked car.
> Finally the barrage stopped. . . . Hands came at me to congratulate. There were pats on the back. (Rodriguez 110)

Violence, which occured in the form of rare and tragic events in Anaya's novel, is close to becoming a way of life in Rodriguez's *barrio.*

In addition to being increasingly nauseated by the violence and destruction, Luis received another impetus that helped him continue his own personal *Bildungsroman.* As a result of the gang wars and the increasing crime rate, the authorities finally realized that there was something wrong, and paid more attention to the problems of the Chicanos. The process was hampered by several setbacks, but community and educational programmes were launched and those who were ready and willing to accept it, help was offered. It happened at the time when the Chicano Movement first appeared. America began to learn new abbreviations: UMAS for United Mexican American Students, MEChA for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán and many more. Several of these organizations exist today.

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Luis discovers for himself that art and literature may be a point of breakout of his miserable situation. First he paints murals, a common activity among *barrio* boys. It was recognized by social organizations, and they soon made efforts to organize the painters by selecting walls, agreeing with the owners of the property, and providing paint and brushes to the participants in the programme.

A real revelation for Luis was literature. He went to the library, and under the suspicious and contemptuous eyes of the librarian he selected books for himself:

> And then there was Piri Thomas, a Puerto Rican brother, *un camarada de aquellas:* his book *Down These Mean Streets* became a living Bible for me. I dog-eared it, wrote in it, copied whole passages so I wouldn't forget their texture, the passion, this searing work of a street dude and hype in Spanish Harlem—a barrio boy like me, on the other side of America. (Rodriguez 138)

Here, and at other parts of the novel, we also find code-switching that is used here to create an atmosphere. At the end of the book the Spanish terms are explained in alphabetical order. Code-switching is also characteristic in Anaya's novel.

Luis Rodriguez was lucky as he came of age together, in fact hand in hand, with the Chicano Movement. Still, the Movement in itself was not sufficient. He needed his own will, his own determination to change things for the better. This is what makes Luis's story a real *Bildungsroman.* His efforts to catch up with the mainstream of American society seem to refute what Nobel Prize-winning Mexican author Octavio Paz says about the *pachuco* not wanting to become a part of American life. Rodriguez makes it clear when he says, "It's about time we become part of America" (212). Integration does not necessarily mean assimilation. It does mean involvement, participation, but to that end enforced all-English education as Linda Chávez and other advocates of making English the exclusive official language of the U. S. believe, is probably not the right way of achieving the involvement of crowds of the population that are at present excluded because of social prejudices and education entirely inadequate for their needs. In this way, they are not allowed to *join* in a "nation of joiners":

> 'What would you want me to tell my students about how they can fulfill their responsibilities as citizens?' one of us used to ask at the conclusion of his interview with community leaders. Almost always the characteristically American answer was 'Tell them to get involved!' The United States is a nation of joiners. (Bellah 167)

The Chicanos do long for America and all the positive things American way of life has to offer—and it does not mean that they want to give up their identity.

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On the contrary—finding their own identity, creating literature and arts based on their own traditions help them in fighting for their rights and due place in American society more effectively. Chicano poetry, Campesino Theatre and Chicano prose all call for action—and as Leal and Barrón put it, "Action is much more effective, when backed by knowledge of one's roots" (Leal 13).

The book that became "a living Bible" for Luis Rodriguez is, similarly to Rodriguez's work, autobiographical. The story takes place a generation earlier than Rodriguez's, but the situations of the two authors are very similar. Thomas's situation is complicated by his skin being darker than that of the average Latino. His quest for indentity is therefore even harder and more complicated than Rodriguez's, and more severe are the trials and tribulations he is going through. Rodriguez did not serve a long prison sentence before his final decision to radically change his life. The similarities between the two novels—and the two lives—are, however, greater than the differences. In fact, it often appears that certain elements of Rodriguez's novel are based or modelled upon Thomas's. On page X of his Prologue to the novel, Thomas writes: "I am . . . Unsatisfied, hoping, and always reaching" (Thomas X). This clause, "always reaching," may have inspired Rodriguez's selection of a title for his novel. Similarly to *Always Running*, Thomas's story is that of a Hispanic boy growing up in an American city in the twentieth century. Similarly to *Always Running*, at the beginning of *Down These Mean Streets* the family is together, father, mother and children in the same household. The role of the mother is uncomparably more important than that of the father, another similarity between the two novels, between the two lives. Thomas sr. makes efforts to be a good father, his son looked up to him, but after a while he somehow vanishes from the life of his son, reappears sometimes, but he just floats somewhere in the background, unable to offer a model to his son, an example to follow.

Thomas's mother is not an enchanting beauty either: "I looked at fat little Moms standing there with a very serious look on her face" (Thomas 18). The "fat little Moms" will be the focus of the family, and it is not her fault that at the end her son strayed away from the family and ended up on the wrong side of the law.

Rodriguez describes the *barrio* as a place where misery was just as important a factor in bringing people together as nationality. Still, misery was selective in terms of nationality: Hispanic people lived together with various Asian immigrants in the *barrio* on the West Coast. Young Piri Thomas soon learns that misery may have a nationality: "[In the Home Relief Office] Most of the people were Puerto Ricans and Negroes; a few were Italians. It seemed that every mother had brought a kid to interpret for her" (Thomas 41-42). The children, a step ahead of their first-generation immigrant parents in integration into their new homeland, picked up more English at school and in the streets than their mothers did. Piri translates for her mother, and the relief officer answers in Spanish—he may have picked up a

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few words and uses them out of courtesy, and it is likely that he meets Hispanics so often that it was not difficult to learn the basics of the language.

Code switching is frequent all through the novel, similarly to Anaya's and Rodriguez's works. Thomas also often uses rude language, although at the beginning of the novel his parents make efforts to dissuade him from that, keeping the boy within the framework of decent Catholic upbringing. As Piri reaches his adolescent age, and spends more time with other kids from the neighborhood, these efforts are hopeless. By the time he has a job as a shoeshine boy, he is a shrewd street kid, with tricks of extracting big tips from customers. Here, class has nationality again, as "Sir" is more often used than "Señor," indicating that middle-class customers, having their shoes cleaned in the streets, tended to be Anglos. Petty crime for young Piri is just as natural as it is for young Rodriguez. He describes a case when he stole $10 from a girl as poor as he, and explained it as "it was her or me, and as always, it had to be me" (Thomas 98).

It appears to be a desperate fight for survival, but it was not. Poverty was not the first and foremost problem for these young men. We learn from the novel that although they were not at all very wealthy and they turned up at the Home Relief Office every now and then, they had a bathroom, regularly had decent food, and enjoyed amenities that were unavailable for most boys of the the same age in wartime Europe, let alone other continents. Piri's family even moved out of Spanish Harlem to a detached house, which was the first sign of starting a lower middle-class life. Stealing $10 from a poor girl who badly needed the money was an act definitely not dictated by desperate starvation. It was a means of demonstrating superiority, showing an ability of being able to survive under all circumstances. For most of the boys spending their time in the streets the real problem was the lack of a real community to belong to—lack of a sense of belonging. They tried and regularly failed:

> The next day I was back on the stoop, slinging sound with my boys, yakking about everything we knew about and also what we didn't, placing ideas on the common altar, splitting the successes and failures of all. That was the part of belonging, the good and bad; it was for all of you. (Thomas 54)

"My boy(s)" is a recurrent term all through the novel, to the very last pages. "His boys" were the real community for Piri Thomas, the community to which he believed he belonged. It was a false belief, but young Piri failed to recognize that. During his search for a community to belong to, he faces racial prejudice as well. It is a slow and painful recognition for him to understand that it does not matter for people that he is not an African-American; his dark skin makes him Black, and that is it. A particularly humiliating experience for him is when he tries to date a "*muchacha blanca*," a white girl. Piri Thomas learns through a painful and bitter

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experience what Glazer and Moynihan describes as follows: "Even in these early days a characteristic pattern of response to the American Negro could be seen in the Puerto Rican community. For the Puerto Ricans are a mixed people. And while in their own minds a man's color meant something very different from what it meant to white Americans, they knew very well its meaning for Americans" (Glazer and Moynihan 92).

Through the story Piri undertakes various jobs, starting with shining shoes, but the jobs are all low-paid positions for unskilled laborers and Piri is dissatisfied with the situation, just as Rodriguez will be a few decades later. He also fails to recognize the interrelation between low-paid and humiliating jobs and the lack of education and trade. In the hope of finding a community to integrate into, he takes a trip to the South, where African-Americans live in higher numbers. When working for his voyage aboard a ship, young Piri refers to it as "coolie" work; he does not recognize that he has no qualification whatsoever that would entitle/enable him to do any other kind of work. Naturally, the inadequate educational system that did not take into account the needs of ethnic minorities—or, perhaps more precisely, erroneously identified the needs of the ethnic minorities with an inflexible and standardized English-only instruction—did not help Piri to recognize the importance of good education for social progress.

As low-paid jobs did not yield the amount of money Piri and "his boys" needed, they took to petty crime. Drug trafficking, shoplifting, becoming a drug addict and finally armed robbery signify the stations in the personal education of Piri Thomas. But even when he is sentenced for the armed robbery, he does not recognize that the punishment for his crime was just and fair, or at least that a crime is to be followed by some kind of a punishment: "The reasoning that my punishment was deserved was absent" (Thomas 255-256). This was the same in Rodriguez's work, who at the beginning believed that punishment for various crimes was an unfair retaliation from the majority society: "The problem is we end up paying more for the same thing than other people do" (Rodriguez 144).

The recognition that learning a trade or learning for a high school diploma might be a good breakout comes slowly. First learning is nothing more than a way of spending the long years in prison. The first signs that learning is a good way of understanding oneself, a way of finding our place in the world, come late in the novel: "Learning made me painfully aware of life and me. What had I been? How had I become that way? What could I be? How could I make it?" (Thomas 298).

This recognition came together with Piri's return to his Catholicism. The Catholic faith of the Puerto Ricans is described as not particularly strong and influential: "Roman Catholicism is not a national church, as it is in Ireland and Poland. It sets the general frame of life by baptizing (most), marrying (less), and burying, and its calendar sets the holidays and festivals, but its impact on the

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people, in guiding their lives and molding their ideas, and in serving as a vessel for their social life, is relatively small" (Glazer and Moynihan 103).

Still, for somebody as deep in the hardships of life as Piri Thomas, Catholicism was a considerable help in finding the way out. In prison he learns about the role of religion in life in general, he learns from the Muslims that a man needs to have human dignity, regardless of race and color. This is an important factor in making Thomas able to accept himself. When he is out of prison, he perhaps for the first time in his life, recognizes simple, basic facts of life. Now it seems that being normal was cheap and easy, and being a drug addict was hell on Earth: "I made mental figures and my junkie *panín* needed seventy-two dollars a day to keep from coming apart—to stay normal. Something I was doing for nothing" (Thomas 328). Thomas, however, paid a high price for "staying normal," to avoid the danger of falling apart. He was ready to turn his back on his old self, and start a new life of his own, accepting some of the facts of life and the laws of society. The author allows the *panín* to make the final dramatic plea to God and the Virgin, to talk about dignity, but there is no doubt that these are in fact Thomas's words, his own determination and conviction about his own future.

For Anaya, Rodriguez and Piri Thomas the traditional values of their ethnic community—their roots—are important, but there are also those who are willing to leave their own roots behind, who have different ideas about "joining" the mainstream society. Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* aims at less than Rodriguez's novel. Cisneros' ambitions are primarily personal—she longs for a personal American dream: a decent middle-class lifestyle. The story, similarly to Rodriguez's and Thomas's works, is highly autobiographical. Esperanza has positive memories of her mother only. Her memories about her father are either neutral—he used to shave in front of the mirror while listening to music—or explicitly negative, when his snoring at night disturbed the others. The reason why fathers are relatively unimportant characters in both Rodriguez' and Cisneros' works is perhaps that they fail as providers. They are supposed to provide their families with American living standards, financial stability, good education for the children, but in the *barrio* they are unable to do so. Many Mexican-American families live in the *barrio,* that is, the district populated primarily by Hispanic people, but we learn from Rodriguez that many other nationalities living in poverty and deprivation share the *barrio* with Hispanics. Rodriguez and Thomas often refer to the place they used live in as *barrio,* whereas Cisneros does not. In her novel not even the word *barrio* is used, perhaps because

> Cisneros is, typically, more interested in detailing the dynamics of her own community rather than representing conflicts between Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans. Conflicts between Anglo and Latino cultures are, of course, present in Cisneros's writing, but they often take the form of

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> encounters between relatively assimilated Latinos and relatively unassimilated ones. (Romero, "Sandra Cisneros")

The avoidance of the word *barrio* may come from the fact that Cisneros grew up in Chicago, a northern city, where the Hispanic community was smaller than in the cities of the Southwest. What we find in the novel is, however, not any different from any *barrio*: a rundown neighborhood with small and crowded houses with many people with Hispanic names in it. At one point in the novel, Cisneros even draws up the geographical boundaries of the *barrio*, when they try a new car and make a round trip in it, but the author does not use the word.

What Romero claims about the description of the conflicts between Anglo and Latino cultures is clear in "Never Marry a Mexican," the heroine of which, Clemencia leaves their middle-class home to go to the *barrio* when her mother marries a "white" man, that is, a non-Mexican person. "Never Marry a Mexican" for Cisneros is perhaps never marry at all—she is single, does not have a husband and children—"nobody's mother and nobody's wife," as described in the "Notes about the author" at the end of the novel. As Romero points out, when discussing her experience about teaching Cisneros to international students is that "[o]ne potential source of discomfort for students is Cisneros's manifestly feminist sensibility. Some students may accuse her (as they would accuse virtually any other feminist writer) of 'man-bashing'" (Romero, "Sandra Cisneros"). It is difficult to escape that conclusion when we read descriptions which suggest that men are the reason for somebody's being bad and miserable: "They are bad those Vargases, and how can they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come" (Cisneros 29).

The suffering mother appears together with the image of the man who fails as a provider for the family. Where there is no reason for blaming a man for ignoring his family, the man is simply ugly and repulsive, whereas the woman is kind and attractive:

> The grandpa slept on the living room couch and snored through his teeth. His feet fat and doughy like tamales, and he powdered and stuffed into white socks and brown leather shoes.
> The grandma's feet were lovely as pink pearls and dressed in velvety high heels that made her walk with a wobble, but she wore them anyway because they were pretty. (Cisneros 39)

It does not occur to the author that a man may also suffer, if from nothing else, then from some disease. Cisneros, unlike Anzaldúa, has not become lesbian,

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but her rejection of the male sex makes her live alone. At the end of the novel Cisneros longs for a house of her own, and makes it clear what kind of a house it is going to be: "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With a porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. . . . Nobody's garbage to pick up after" (Cisneros 108).

In the case of Cisneros, the melting pot does not fail to melt; it functions well. Her desires are strictly personal, she does not mind melting up in American society, leaving behind her cultural and ethnic heritage. This is pure assimilation: personal goals, personal desires to be satisfied. Luis wanted to leave poverty and deprivation, Esperanza wanted to leave behind her entire former life, including her heritage, with all the negative and positive features and examples.

When the individual is unable to find a point where he can join the mainstream society, and he is unable either to be assimilated or integrated, the result is tragedy. Such a story is written by Richard Dokey, whose short story entitled *Sánchez* was written in 1967. All the characters in it embody basically positive attributes. Juan Sánchez is a hard-working migrant, who makes a home in the United States. He marries the girl he loves, and who "accepted his philosophy completely, understood his needs, made it her own" (Dokey 262). The loss of this beloved wife is the only tragedy in the story. Jesús, Sánchez's son, also works hard, finds a job among the Gringos, and is proud to show his place of work to his father. Jesús also shows his father the entertainment facilities near the place he works. This is the moment when Sánchez sadly realizes that he has lost his son. Jesús loves and respects his father with a true filial love, but he is absorbed by the world of the *norteamericanos.* So much so, that he does not even understand why his father is not equally enthusiastic about the wonderful things he shows him. After the loss of his wife, Sánchez has to release his son. The end of this short story is suicide—Sánchez sets all his belongings and finally his house on fire. The reason for his suicide is his sense of unbearable loss. The values of the *norte-americanos*—a (relatively) well-paid job, entertainment, a new place in a competitive society—absorb a second-generation Chicano who is ready to adapt to this world. Sánchez went to the United States to find a better living. He worked hard, but he never really assimilated—he either did not want to, or was not able to, and remained a *paisano,* a man of simple needs, living close to the land he cultivated. Working hard is a value Sánchez shares with the *norteamericanos*—the only value, in fact. Technical and social progress, entertainment, the company of people of the same age are not things he is looking for, and when he realizes that he has missed something, it is too late. He could have chosen either of two alternatives: showing more flexibility in connection with mainstream America, in other words, showing more inclination to assimilate, at least to some extent. The other is taking more care in bringing up his son in the traditions of his own nation, to keep him closer to his own *raza,* thus slowing him down on his way towards

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assimilation. But his son starts to assimilate at a pace that makes it hopeless for Sánchez to catch up with. Sánchez did not simply perish in the fire, as the people in town believed: "But of course, on that score they were mistaken. Juan Sánchez had simply gone home" (Dokey 267). Sánchez chose the way of his departure, having completed his mission on Earth.

It is likely that we find fewer and fewer mothers suffering and serving the way described by Berg and Kitano. As an increasing number of Chicanos elevate themselves to middle class status, and more and more of them adopt values of the Anglo middle class, Chicanas become more "emancipated" as it is regarded by the mainstream society. During the demonstrations against the new immigration laws in the streets of the cities of California a few years ago, many women wearing the T-shirts of the *Latinos Unidos* fought for their rights side by side with men. But these were ethnic-conscious demonstrations—as turning away from old family values, and entirely giving up the role of the mother as the person keeping the family together would probably be the same as giving up one of the most important core elements of Hispanic cultural heritage. Although the selection of these particular works might appear to be arbitrary, and a great number of any other works can be selected and arranged into various combinations for the purposes of an analysis, there is little doubt that another set of works would show a similarly great variety of themes and approaches, defying any simplifying categorization.

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