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Living *La Vida Loca*: Hispanic Immigration and American Identity

by Emily Krauspe

(Honors English 1102)

The Assignment: For this assignment the student had to write an 8-10 page argumentative position paper on a research question of her choice that is related to her major or program of study. She needed to draw from no less than ten (10) different sources, which must be both print and non-print sources.

The United States has long been defined as “a nation of immigrants,” a place where many cultures and peoples melt together to form a single, unified society. However, as the number of people entering from Mexico and Latin America—both legally and illegally—continues to grow steadily, many Americans fear that the increasing numbers signal danger to the economy and culture of the United States. This is a different wave than in the past, they say, unlike anything the country has seen before. Still, there is no denying that Hispanic immigrants have hugely impacted the American identity and will continue to do so. Their overall influence on and assimilation into American society, however, remains to be seen—and it is nothing to be feared.

Fear of immigration is nothing new in this country. “Americans have always taken pride in their immigrant heritage but ironically feared new immigration at the same time” (“Development”). A *New York Times* editorial clearly expresses this characteristic of American society: “There is a limit to our powers of assimilation, and when it is exceeded the country suffers from something very much like indigestion” (“Immigration”). Although it may be easy to see where this sentiment would fall into the more recent debates over immigration, it was actually written in the 1880s, in response to the floods of people coming to the US from Germany and Ireland. A political party platform from that time shares this viewpoint, stating that, “It is an incontrovertible truth that the civil institutions of the United States of America have been seriously affected, and that they now stand in imminent peril from rapid and enormous increase in the body of residents of foreign birth...” (“Immigration”).

Nowadays, few would argue that the European immigrants of past decades—not only the Irish and Germans, but also those from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe—did not assimilate. Indeed, many Americans trace much of their ancestry to one or more of these groups. “There are a number of grounds for thinking that the United States will assimilate Hispanic immigrants just as it has earlier ethnic groups,” according to author Francis Fukuyama (“Identity”). For one thing, he notes, they are largely Christian, a traditional component of American identity since the first settlers arrived in the 17th century, and they also often “have stronger traditional family values.”

The religious element is one of four main factors that, according to scholar Samuel P. Huntington, have established American identity over time. In his 2004 book *Who Are We?*, he writes that “the values, institutions, and culture” of the original settlers “defined America in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and most importantly religion” (38). By the end of World War II, however, many different ethnic groups had immigrated to the US, mostly from Europe, and the first component was no longer a main factor of American identity. Race suffered a similar fate after the integration of African-Americans following the civil rights movement. This left only culture and religion as the remaining traditional components. While Hispanics may find it easier to assimilate where religion is concerned, it is the cultural factor that is called into question.

The effect of Hispanic immigration on American culture is vast and continues to grow stronger; no previous group has generated quite so large an impact. The evidence is perhaps most obvious in American popular culture. Ketchup, an American staple, has been replaced by salsa as the

country's number one condiment (Masci 872). The choice of Mexican-style chain restaurants is no longer limited to Taco Bell and Chili's, but now includes places like Chipotle, Baja Fresh, and Qdoba as well. Prefer cooking at home to eating out? It's still easy to eat a traditional Mexican or Latin American meal; go to almost any grocery store, and there's an entire row or section devoted to Hispanic products, from cheese and *chiles* to imported canned black beans. And a recent product guide for Aurora, Illinois-based Oberweis Dairy even features an advertisement for an upcoming "Cinco de Mayo Super Sale!"

Latinos are flexing their entertainment muscles too, as evidenced by the popularity of musical performers such as Ricky Martin, J. Lo, Shakira, and most recently Daddy Yankee. In 2005, the Latin Grammy Awards were broadcast in Spanish for the first time on Univision, one of two major Spanish-language television networks in the US ("Historic," Masci 872). Even public television has jumped on board with kids' shows like *Dora the Explorer* and *Maya and Miguel*, in which characters speak a blend of Spanish and English. In *Maya and Miguel*, for example, the main characters have a deep respect for their *abuelita*, or grandma, who lives with them. The program showcases not only their bilingualism, but also the traditional family values referred to by Fukuyama.

An even more recent phenomenon is "Hurban" (Hispanic + Urban) radio, which began in Los Angeles. Stations with this format generally play Reggaeton, a style of music fusing salsa with Jamaican dancehall and Puerto Rican hip-hop; DJs speak a mix of Spanish and English. Jennifer Ordonez recently reported in *Newsweek* that, since switching to Hurban formats, "slumping rock stations in Houston, Miami and Albuquerque have seen their ratings skyrocket" ("Hurban Sprawl"). Ordonez also points out that this is a generation "hungry for both its Hispanic roots and its new cross-cultural reality." While this may be the case, this substantial cultural influence is also what has most people worried.

"Radio and television keep the spoken language alive and current so that Spanish, unlike the native languages of previous immigrants into the United States, shows no sign of fading," writes Maria Hsia Chang, a political science professor at the University of Nevada in Reno ("Immigration From Mexico"). Additionally, Hispanics have a closer geographical proximity to their home countries in many cases, says Chang. "A result of all that is the failure by Chicanos to be fully assimilated into the larger American society and culture...[it] is part of the Chicano culture of resistance—a culture that actively resists assimilation into mainstream America" ("Immigration From Mexico").

Chang is certainly not alone in her views. Others claim that Hispanic immigrants, especially those here illegally, don't want to learn English or adopt an American way of life, and they're also a strain on US economy: "In a study conducted in 1994, then-governor of California Pete Wilson discovered that the cost of illegals to California, in unemployment, medical, educational and other services was more than \$4 billion annually" (Hayes "Illegal").

Such arguments may seem fine and good, and quite reasonable, especially when they appear to be backed by fact. Yet they also tend to over-generalize while at the same time ignoring vital pieces of information. Though it is true that a 1994 study found that immigrants cost \$4 billion annually, George Borjas of the University of California at San Diego discovered that "when work productivity and consumer spending are measured against welfare payments and the cost of social services" the result is a net *gain* of \$4 billion per year. And in New York State, more than 40,000 companies are owned by immigrants, resulting in a \$3.5 billion annual contribution to the state's economy ("Immigration").

Immigrants also generate jobs, according to Urban Institute economist Maria Enchauteagai, who "found that in the 400 largest counties of the US, 46 new jobs were created for every 100-person increase in the population of adult immigrants. The corresponding figure for native-born Americans was 23." And during the 1980s, unemployment was almost one-third higher in the 10 states with the lowest numbers of immigrants than in the 10 states with the highest numbers ("Immigration").

What's more, while many Hispanic immigrants work, as author Chang notes, "as maids, gardeners, or fruit pickers" ("Immigration From Mexico"), there are also many ascending towards the top, from entrepreneurs running technology companies in Silicon Valley ("Immigration") to those like California Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante. And even among the "maids and gardeners," there are Hispanics working hard to attain something more.

In the documentary film *Maid In America*, director Anayansi Prado profiles three immigrant women, including a young, first-generation Mexican woman who earns money as a housecleaner in order to pay for accounting and English-language classes. She knows that English is necessary to reach her goal, and she is willing to work hard to have the career she desires. It is an intriguing portrait of steadfast belief in the American dream—a person who comes to the US with the hope that she can be and have anything she wants—while at the same time an accurate and interesting representation of a contradiction present in American society—that you can have and be anything "unless" or "except for". This example also debunks another of Chang's claims: that "to study hard is to 'act white' and exhibit group disloyalty" ("Immigration From Mexico"). The woman profiled in the documentary belongs to social and educational groups that are mainly female and Hispanic.

There are many more exceptions to what Chang and others may consider the rule as well. Take Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and author Hector Tobar, a 2nd-generation Hispanic immigrant. His parents came to the United States from Guatemala in the late 1960s. In addition to instilling in him a deep reverence for Che Guevara, Tobar's parents also emphasized the need to learn English. "My undeniably accent-free English," he writes in his recent book *Translation Nation*, "...was in a sense a measure of [our] family's achievement" (9). His father "made learning English his own obsession too, taking night classes and making himself fluent enough to write business letters" (9).

Tobar and his father are not alone in their recognition of the importance of English. "Learning English is an essential part of successfully integrating," says Clarissa Martinez, a Mexican immigrant who now serves as head of state and local policy for the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic activist group (Freedburg "English"). And "in a recent series of focus groups with Spanish-speakers across the country," Professor Luis Ricardo Fraga of Stanford University, found that "the number one goal that all of them referred to was a desire to learn English better...they all said one of the major barriers is, we don't have enough opportunity" (Freedburg "English"). Hispanic immigrants do, indeed, want to learn English, and they want their children especially to learn it. But the bilingual programs in classrooms across the US are not the solution.

At present, bilingual education "requires teaching core subjects in students' native tongues while they learn English" (Girard 37). "The main problem with children in bilingual programs is that they didn't learn English," says Rosalie Porter, a former director of bilingual and ESL programs for the Newton Public Schools in Massachusetts (qtd. in Girard 37). Additionally, kids in bilingual and ESL programs are often segregated from the other students, doing nothing to help build English language skills or better assimilate. Many favor language submersion techniques, with an English-only approach. Alternatives include "mixed" environments, such as a kindergarten program at Gary school, in West Chicago, Illinois, in which both native and immigrant children are placed in one classroom and lessons alternate between being taught in Spanish and English. Both groups then have a chance to benefit from the background of the other. Most importantly, Hispanic immigrants—all immigrants, for that matter—must be given a chance to really learn English before they can be blamed for not trying or wanting to.

Still, learning English doesn't amount to automatic assimilation. Though some say that "immigrant children also need to embrace American culture and values" in order to fully assimilate (Masci 878), this isn't entirely true. There is much evidence of the influence of past immigrant groups on the culture and society in the United States, thus forming the very "American history" many feel Latinos need to be learning.

“St. Patrick’s Day celebrates Irish pride and culture, but no one thinks Irish-Americans are anything but American,” says Cecilia Munoz, vice president of Legislative affairs from the National Council of La Raza (qtd. in Masci 880). Immigration lawyer Kathy Culliton also points out that, “Parts of the country have been radically changed by immigrant inflows before. Look at New York with the Irish and California with the inflows of Asian Immigrants” (qtd. in Masci 877). And Munoz adds that New Mexico “has been absorbing large numbers of Latinos for 500 years... If you go there, you’ll see that it is a very American place” (qtd. in Masci 877). In short, past waves of immigrants were just as feared to be “stealing” or disregarding the culture of the United States; now they are a vital part of America’s history and have contributed to the country’s values, beliefs, and framework. While it might be easy to assume past generations stepped off the boat and automatically began Americanizing themselves, the fact is that it happened over generations; both assimilation and identity formation take time.

America is not in danger of losing her identity—it is only evolving. “We live in a global economy,” says Culliton (qtd. in Masci 880), and that isn’t going to change any time soon. Moreover, we live in a global world, and it is necessary “to be able to understand and interact with other languages and cultures” if America wants to remain strong (Culliton qtd. in Masci 880). Instead of condemning and fearing the changes at hand, it is time to accept them. Instead of worrying about what may be lost, it is time to look at all there is to be gained.

There is no question that Hispanic immigration is altering the American identity, from its massive cultural influences to its economic effects. This diverse body of people is in many ways similar to past waves of immigrants, immigrants that have been successfully integrated into American society while at the same time leaving undeniable impressions. Eventually, the same may also be true for Hispanic immigrants; only time will tell how they will assimilate, as well as determine their overall impact on American identity. Not to be forgotten is the fact that, in reality, we are all one. We may have different backgrounds, colors, and languages, but learning to successfully understand and integrate these differences while recognizing our similarities is an especially necessary challenge in this increasingly global world. And perhaps, one day, the notion of what it means to be an American will change entirely. As the band Los Tigres del Nortes sings, “I was born the color of the earth, and my inheritance was Spanish. Those from the north say I am Latino...[but] I was born in America, and I don’t see why I can’t be called American. Because America is the whole continent, and he who is born here is American” (Tobar 71). It is time Americans accept and embrace that culture and identity change. As for blending the current wave of immigrants into the melting pot? Well—it will certainly add a lot of flavor.

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