

English 1030

Student: Lauren Murphy

Instructor: Ms. Lisa Boyd

The Lonely Effects of Assimilation

The Europeans who claimed what was to become America chose to integrate the land's present inhabitants and future immigrants in order to become the dominating race and, consequently, made other cultures feel inferior to their own. The Angel family, Mexican-Indian immigrants and the subject of Arturo Islas's Migrant Souls, becomes victim to the Americans' forceful demands for conformity. While Sancho, the father, never complains about assimilation, yet never becomes fully "assimilated," his wife, Eduviges, strives to be a part of the American culture. These conflicting reactions and the existing prejudice in the community leave their daughter, Josie, uncertain of her true identity.

In the early 1830's, Mexican-Indians, seeking a better life in the "land of opportunity," crossed the border into America only to find themselves and all who followed forced to assimilate to a new culture. The white Americans pushed their food, their beliefs, their clothing style, and the English language upon these immigrants. Some of the seemingly brainwashed Mexican-Indians saw the American actions as signs of kindness and acceptance. Yet, fearful others considered being caught by the strict American border patrol a "fate worse than death" (490). Immigration officers warned "foreign-looking" people to carry citizenship identification at all times, and they "sneaked up on innocent dark-skinned people, and deported them," possibly also "mak[ing them] suffer unspeakable mortifications" (484, 486). Those legally able to reach America became subjected to American ideals and customs. The whites relocated those unwilling to live the "accepted American lifestyle" to specified areas. Aware of this law, Sancho cynically warns his daughters, "Don't wear [the Native American Thanksgiving costume] outside the house or they'll pick you up and send you to a reservation" (484). Sancho disagrees with actions such as these, finding them foolish, but he withholds his feelings of anger.

Although Sancho respects Americans and abides by their rules, he recognizes prejudices against Mexicans, and he remains faithful to his true heritage. He remains a Mexican-Indian "at heart"; he considers himself an "American citizen of Mexican heritage" (487). As Sancho is a "slower, more patient driver," he is a patient person, able not to show frustration caused by constant law enforcement and suspicion of his race (485). Once, as his family carefully drives across the border, he makes a strong effort to avoid trouble. "Just say 'American' when the time comes," he tells his daughters, as if they are all programmed to do so (487). But away from officials, Sancho leads a Mexican life. At dinners, he enjoys "eat[ing] the beans," not the duck, symbolizing his preference for his Mexican heritage over the American culture (483). Offended by those who do not accept his culture, Sancho labels them "ignorant" for labeling him as an "alien" (488). Obviously sensitive to stereotype of Mexican-Indians, Sancho, rarely a serious person, intimately discusses his pride in his culture with Josie. He tells her that although some unknowledgeable whites think Mexicans are not human beings, she should be proud of her race which was actually in America before those who now consider themselves "American."

Sancho's wife, Eduviges, oppositely affected by assimilation, tries so desperately to conform to the American way of life that she loses a true sense of her identity. She tries to influence and to force her children to act as the whites do, and if, by their own instinct, they disobey, she refers to them as "your darlings" to Sancho, appearing to temporarily disown them

(483). She carefully watches society and, in turn, reads "glossy American magazines" and shops at an American-identified grocery store, Safeway (484). She even finds the Native-American race more acceptable than her own because she wrongly believes they speak English (485). Eduviges overly concerns herself with being American, and so she becomes bitter towards her race and desensitized to the troubles of poor Mexican immigrants. Attempting to disassociate herself from this group, she ironically refers to them as "wetbacks" and "imbecile cretins" (485). She makes apparent the fact that she would "have a fit" if her family were to help poor Indian women (489). The Angel children recognize the reason for their mother's feelings: "Mexican Indians [are] too close to home and the truth" (485). She tries helplessly and selfishly to forget the troubles which led her to America, but she constantly returns to painful memories when she sees Mexican immigrants in need. Eduviges's lack of concern and respect for her own race dramatically differs from her husband's feelings.

Eduviges's and Sancho's conflicting views on assimilation affect their entire family by causing disagreements between the parents and confusing the children, leaving them uncertain of whom they should believe. On Thanksgiving, the commemoration of the day whites "overtook" America, the Angel family risks losing citizenship by participating in an Anglo tradition. The descriptions of the turkey, a symbol of Thanksgiving and the object the family sets out to buy, as "stupid" and "dumb" exemplify the fact that the parents' disagreements can impact such a small and relatively meaningless situation as purchasing a turkey (487, 491). Although Sancho would like to eat enchiladas during Thanksgiving, "a ritual that mean[s] nothing to him," his wife claims in a "fit of guilt [for acting un-American]" that she must cook a traditional turkey (484). Ironically, the family drives to Mexico to buy and return with their turkey. As they illegally cross the border with a live animal, the complications with which they are met symbolize the constant complications in the argumentative family. The abundant conflicts resulting from Sancho's and Eduviges's differences leave Josie despairingly confused.

Surrounded, trapped, and influenced by her parents' dissimilar beliefs, Josie struggles to discover her own true views on her race. She does not understand how her parents can have such contrasting opinions concerning their culture. Ofelia, Josie's sister, best describes the feeling which most likely plagues Josie--"suspended in midair while the sky revolve[s] around [her]" (486). The contradictions among the family leave her feeling as if she lives in "the middle of nowhere," as if the middle of nowhere exists in her heart (486). She is "tossed around" by statements that she is an alien and statements that she should be proud of her Mexican heritage. Striving to place herself in a definitive category, Josie searches her heart for answers, but finds only emptiness, proving that she recognizes that her lonely feelings result from being trapped between two cultures. In the selection from Migrant Souls, the use of both the Spanish and English languages and the description of a meal of menudos, gorditas, and Coca-Cola symbolize Josie's two identities--Mexican and American.

In the Angel family, as well as in the families of other immigrants, the power of assimilation results in feelings of despair, uncertainty, and inferiority. Eduvige's and Sancho's opposing thoughts on the American culture impact their family's events every day. Constantly in the presence of completely different opinions, young Josie wanders farther from the realization of her identity. And so, forcing families to conform to foreign societies may cause conflicts and destroy the child's sense of self.

Works Cited

Islas, Arturo. From Migrant Souls. American Mosaic: Multicultural Readings in Context. Eds. Gabriele Rico, Barbara Roche and Sandra Mano. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1995. 483-491.