

## From Assimilation Narrative to Transcultural Texts – The Case of Hispanic-American Drama

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In literary theory and literary history the works of (ethnic) minority authors—and similarly, the works of authors dealing with minorities—are often referred to as “assimilation narrative.” This term tends to suggest that minority authors of works 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. Milton M. Gordon provides various definitions of assimilation. A relatively early one is the following:

An early and influential definition of “assimilation” by the two sociologists Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess reads as follows: Assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to understand and believe that one ethnic group accepts the other’s memories and sentiments, let alone historical heritage of the other one. If an individual or an entire ethnic group suppresses its own sentiments and historic heritage for the sake of survival it is not identical with accepting those of the dominant group.

Another author Gordon quotes in order to support his argumentation is Henry Pratt Fairchild:

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<sup>1</sup> Milton M. Gordon. *Assimilation in American Life. The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*. New York: Oxford UP, 1964. p. 73., quoting Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1921, p. 735.

social assimilation does not require the complete identification of all the units, but such modifications as eliminate the characteristics of foreign origin, and enable them all to fit smoothly into the typical structure and functioning of the new cultural unit. . . . [and later] In essence, assimilation is the substitution of one nationality pattern for another. Ordinarily, the modifications must be made by the weaker or numerically inferior group<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Fairchild's definition is partly close to a definition of integration, rather than assimilation. It claims that the individuals and groups do not necessarily give up all the "units" of their existence, although in the second half of the quotation, somewhat contradictorily, refutes what he has said two lines above, when assumes that "assimilation is the substitution of one nationality pattern for another." Gordon also points out some of the contradictions in this and other definitions, and continues to find other ones. Such is an interpretation by John Cuber:

Assimilation is] the adoption by a person or group of the culture of another social group to such a complete extent that the person or group no longer has any characteristics identifying him with his former culture and no longer has any particular loyalties to his former culture. Or, the process leading to this adoption.<sup>3</sup>

Gordon browses through a number of definitions and approaches that suggest that assimilation is in fact a mutual process, as also referred to by Park and Burgess above. Although it is natural that the cultural exchange is to some extent mutual, the process is basically one-way; the less powerful, numerically weaker group is melted up in the larger, dominant social, ethnic and/or cultural entity.

Similarly to what Gordon did a few decades before him, Martin N. Marger also examines a range of possible definitions of assimilation, emphasising that it is not a static situation but a slower or faster process:

Most simply, assimilation means increasing similarity or likeness. As Yinger defines it, assimilation is "a process of boundary reduction that

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2 Gordon p. 73., quoting Henry Pratt Fairchild (ed.), *Dictionary of Sociology*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1944, pp. 276-7.

3 Gordon, p. 66., quoting John F. Cuber, *Sociology: A Synopsis of Principles*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 3rd ed., 1955, p. 609.

can occur when members of two or more societies or of smaller cultural groups meet” (1981:249). Similarly, Harold Abramson defines it as “the processes that lead to greater homogeneity in society” (1980:150). Each of these definitions stresses that assimilation is best seen as a path or trajectory on which ethnic groups may move. It is a process, not a fixed condition or state of relations.

The end point of this homogenizing process is, for an ethnic group, the disappearance of any cultural or racial distinction setting it off from other groups (Alba and Nee, 1999). Or, for the society as a whole, it is “the biological, cultural, social, and psychological fusion of distinct groups to create a new ethnically undifferentiated society” (Barth and Noel, 1972:336). Following this idea to its logical end point, with complete assimilation there are no longer distinct ethnic groups. Rather, there is a homogeneous society in which ethnicity is not a basis of social differentiation and plays no role in the distribution of wealth, power, and prestige.<sup>4</sup>

It is necessary to discuss the issue in detail, as the terms *assimilation* and *integration* are still often used interchangeably, although the situation has improved a lot recently, last but not least due to the large-scale international migration and the high number of articles that deal with the problems of *integrating* crowds of people of different ethnic background into European societies.

It is to be noted, however, that most ethnic minority authors do not long for assimilation. The complete assimilation, that is, the disappearance of all ethnic groups, minorities on the altar of an entirely homogeneous society is convenient for majority politicians, and that is exactly what (most) minority authors fight against. There are minority authors who embrace complete and irrevocable assimilation, but they are the minority.

When the social, political and cultural movement of the Hispanics, the Chicano Movement emerged, the intention of the playwrights—and other authors, prose writers and poets—became immediately evident. Luis Valdez’s *campesino theatre* soon turned out to be the mouthpiece of the movement on the stage. Spanish-language theatre has long traditions on the American continent. Historical sources

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4 Martin N. Marger. *Race and Ethnic Relations. American and global Perspectives*. Boston: Cengage Learning. 2017. p. 81., quoting: Yinger, J. Milton. “Toward a Theory of Assimilation and Dissimilation.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1981. 4:249–64., p. 249, Noel, Donald L. “A Theory of the Origin of Ethnic Stratification.” *Social Problems*. 1968. 16:157–72., p. Richard Alba. “Immigration and the American Realities of Assimilation and Multiculturalism.” *Sociological Forum*. 1999., Abramson, Harold. “Assimilation and Pluralism.” Pp. 150–60 in Stephen Thernstrom (ed.), *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1980. p. 150.

mention that when Don Juan de Oñate's expedition arrived at the Rio Grande in 1598, the second thing they did—after drinking a lot from the water of the river, thus escaping death from thirst—was staging a play that was written by a cavalry officer. The play has been lost in the centuries past, but the fact indicates how important, and at the same time natural, theatre was for the *conquistadores*. The play of Oñate's expedition has been lost, but the tradition has not. Huerta talks about the *carpas* as forerunners of the Campesino theatre that emerged in the 1960s. The

*Carpas* were popular vaudeville-like performances that flourished on both sides of the border in the 1920s and 1930s. Mexicans, who found themselves living in an alien nation on land that used to belong to Mexico, were now considered 'traitors' back home and 'outsiders' in the United States. Many *carpa* sketches deal with this sense of dislocation, making fun of the 'Gringos' as well as of those Mexicans who attempted to 'fit in' by denying their culture and language. (...) [T]hese early examples of political theatre in the barrios were performed primarily, but not solely, in Spanish, thus presaging the bilingual expressions of Chicano theatre.<sup>5</sup>

The sense of dislocation in a land that formerly belonged to another country is all too familiar for people living in many parts of Europe as well, especially for those in Central and Eastern Europe. The way Huerta rejects assimilation—that is, "fitting in" at the expense of abandoning one's culture and language—is just as natural as the Hispanics mock and scorn the people who are ready to do that.

It is the tradition of the *carpas* that Valdez built his *campesino theatre* upon. The plays, although written primarily for the seasonal farmworkers in California and other areas in the Southwest, were also meant for the mainstream American readers. Valdez chose his topics from the darkest dimensions of urban life: crime, riots, unfair punishment and racial prejudice. The very choice of his subjects convincingly indicate that Valdez seeks an opportunity to deal with things that are taken from the Hispanic community, and that are not very well known to mainstream American audiences. Valdez also chose topics that were despised by the (Anglo-) American public, or were at least found suspicious. Valdez intended to show that there is no reason to look at these topics in a hostile way or with suspicion. Bruce-Novoa describes how Valdez joined forces with Chávez as follows:

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5 Jorge Huerta, "When Sleeping Giants Awaken: Chicano Theatre in the 1960s." *Theatre Survey*, May 2002: 43.1. Arts & Humanities Database, pp. 23-36. p. 24.

Shortly after Chávez had established the United Farm Workers Union, Luis Valdez came to him at his headquarters in Delano, California, and offered to organize dramatic presentations for the strikers. The performances would be designed to both entertain and instruct. Valdez had personal, professional, and ideological credentials to support his offer. A Chicano native of Delano, Valdez had worked as a laborer in the very fields Chávez aimed to organize. But he also had a long association with drama, beginning in high school, activities which won him a university scholarship and an eventual degree in drama from San Jose State.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most famous plays by Valdez is *Zoot Suit*. The "zoot suit" was a characteristic outfit, almost like a uniform, worn by *pachucos*, that is, young Hispanic men. It consisted of highly colorful, usually one or two sizes bigger than necessary trousers and jackets, with some exaggerated features, e. g. a too long watch chain. As the zoot suit was different from mainstream clothing, it was looked upon with suspicion and hostility on the side of the Anglo-Saxons. The suspicion and hostility escalated into the open violence called the "Zoot Suit Riots" during World War II, when the paranoia in connection with the "enemy within" led to attacks on Hispanic youths (and everyone else, who was regarded as different from the majority society). One of the main objectives of Valdez—in accordance with the intentions of the movement of Chávez—was to dispel the prejudice and hostility. The play, *Zoot Suit*, begins with a brief English introduction. Enters El Pachuco, addresses the audience in Spanish, and then we read/hear this:

(EL PACHUCO *breaks character and addresses the audience in perfect English.*)  
Ladies and gentlemen  
the play you are about to see  
is a construct of fact and fantasy.  
The Pachuco Style was an act in Life  
and his language a new creation.  
His will to be was an awesome force  
eluding all documentation ...<sup>7</sup>

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6 Juan Bruce-Novoa. Chicano Theater: Editing the Origin Myth. In: *Hispanic-American Writers*. New edition. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism. 2009. pp. 3-17.

7 Luis Valdez. *Zoot suit*. In *Zoot Suit and Other Plays* by Luis Valdez. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1992. epub. pp. 43-166. p. 47.

Not only is the English pronunciation of the character supposed to be impeccable, but the style of the first English monologue of the character is educated and sophisticated. The purpose is winning the attention of the audience, including the Anglo-Saxon viewers. Later on, El Pachuco corrects the press when they speak to him in English:

THE LINEUP: Police Arrest Mexican Youths. Black Widow Girls in Boy Gangs.

PRESS: The City of the Angeles ...

PACHUCO: (*Sharply.*) El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles de

Porciúncula, pendejo.

PRESS: Los Angeles Daily News Headline...<sup>8</sup>

The sharp voice in which El Pachuco corrects the journalist is a sign of the awakening conscience and possessiveness: Los Angeles is *our* city, at least as much as it is the Anglos'.

The disdainful and vulgar word attached to the end of the sentence—*pendejo*—is not very common in Valdez's work. In most cases, *pendejo* simply means a stupid person, and may even be used affectionately, but this is not the case here.

Chicago-born playwright Carlos Morton, while also dealing with issues of contemporary Hispanic-American society, reaches back to the beginnings of Spanish history in the New World in his play written about Hernán Cortés's interpreter and mistress, *La Malinche*. The play was written in 1983, but was not published until the end of the century. Aikaterini Delikonstantinidou sums up Carlos Morton's life and inspirations briefly in the introduction to an interview as follows:

Prolific throughout his career as playwright, which spans well over four decades, Carlos Morton draws material for his theatre work from his many travels across continents. His family's immigrant background and his experience of living throughout the United States and Latin America inspired early on a deep appreciation of different cultures that shines through his plays.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Luis Valdez, p. 53.

9 Aikaterini Delikonstantinidou. "An Interview with Carlos Morton." [www.critical-stages.org/20/american-theatre-now-an-interview-with-carlos-morton/](http://www.critical-stages.org/20/american-theatre-now-an-interview-with-carlos-morton/)

Following the footsteps of Valdez, Morton launches *La Malinche* in alternated English and Spanish; the introductory instructions are in English, but the first character appearing on the stage, an Aztec goddess, sings in Spanish. The language of the Aztecs is Nahuatl, but the goddess uses Spanish, not only because Morton does not speak the Nahuatl, but it also indicates that she belongs to Mexico, and the Spanish is older on the American continent than English. The lament of the goddess, opening the play in Spanish, is repeated in English at its end, thus enclosing the play in a frame, and creating a synthesis of the two cultures.

In *La Malinche*, Morton treats the birth of Mexico as a new culture and new nation. While the author spins and weaves the lines of the story, and creates a dynamic action with moving a handful of characters only, the first instances of cultural exchange take place, and the first cases of code switching occur. That code switching occurs between Nahuatl and Spanish, since the original name of the female protagonist is Malintzin, and that was distorted into Malinche, more easily pronounced by the Spaniards:

CORTÉS

Your name?

Malinche

Malintzin.

CORTÉS (*mispronouncing it*)

Ma-lin-che? They say you speak many languages.<sup>10</sup>

Code switching and learning from each other between the Aztecs and Spaniards continue all through the play. Morton's aim is to show that what the Anglos often scorn, the dual cultural heritage of the Hispanic-Americans, is in fact a resource. The Hispanic-American theatre has gone a long way in a short time: from the *carpas* of the early 20th century through dramas inspired by events of direct political-legal oppression to the liberated plays that deal with the daily life and problems of Latinos. Finally, the assimilationist strategies were forced to retreat. Jimmy A. Noriega summarizes the—then—triumphant advent of the second decade of the 21st century for Latino theatre as follows:

The (...) decade (...) began with a series of milestones that signaled a major turning point for Latina/o theatre. In April 2010 Luis Valdez's classic *Zoot Suit* opened at the Compañía Nacional de Teatro in Mexico City, and the

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10 Carlos Morton. "La Malinche". *Dreaming on a Sunday in the Alameda and other Plays*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. pp. 3-56. p. 8.

Association of Theatre Journalists honored it as the Best Mexican Musical of the year, making it the first time a non-Mexican play was given the award. John Leguizamo performed his one-man show *Ghetto Klown* at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway from March to July 2011; it received Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle awards and was eventually filmed for television. In 2012 Quiara Alegría Hudes became the first Latina to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play *Water by the Spoonful*, which went on to become one of the most produced plays of the 2013–14 season.<sup>11</sup>

It is noteworthy that the author uses both genders, recognizing the increasing importance of female playwrights in the world of Hispanic American theatre. That Valdez's play only needed a short period, a mere few decades, to be labelled as *classic* indicates that Hispanic drama—and literature in general—has undergone a really spectacular progress.

A contemporary playwright from California, Octavio Solis, takes code switching to new heights in his plays. The reason for that is not that he intends to make it difficult for an Anglo audience to read and understand his dramas, but because he primarily writes to an audience in California, a lot of members of which are able to speak or at least understand both languages. Even the titles of his plays are sometimes English (*The Man of the Flesh*), sometimes Spanish (*La Posada Mágica*), and sometimes the two languages are mixed within one title (*The 7 Visions of Encarnación*). Still, the titles are easily understandable for an Anglo audience as well, as the Spanish terms are familiar from an infinite number of inns and motels, advertising their services in Spanish or in two languages, the word *mágica* is the Spanish for magic. Similarly, *encarnación* does not sound strange either, as it is derived from the same Latin word as the English *incarnation* is. The communities in which the plays of Solis take place, are from the American Southwest, where the two cultures mingle and mutually influence and enrich each other.

Sylvie sings the slow Mexican ballad as everyone listens.

SYLVIE *Si yo me voy*

*Me extrañarás*

*Te dejare sin gusto y paz*

*Tus gran deseos*

*Se secarán*

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11 Jimmy A. Noriega. "Don't Teach These Plays!": Latina/o Theatre and the Termination of the Tucson Unified School District's Mexican American Studies Program." In: *Theatre Topics*. Baltimore. Vol.27, Issue 1, (Mar 2017): 37-48. p. 37.



*Si mis cariños  
De aquí se van.  
(...)*

AL This white chick singing along with real heart, singin' a Spanish song I heard a long time ago. *Cancion de mi madre*.<sup>12</sup>

Here Solis italicizes the Spanish words in his text, at other places he does not:

DUANE

Al, you owe me. We are camaradas, and as camaradas we do for each other, we make sacrifices.

AL

Yo no te debo ni madre, cabrón!"<sup>13</sup>

The rude answer, that translates roughly into "I owe neither you nor your mother, you bastard," is entirely in Spanish, but the words *debo* and *madre* might be familiar to Anglo readers/viewers as well: debt and mother.

Female playwrights, who claim their well-deserved place in the literary canon, tend to deal with maternal and household chores, as the audiences—both Hispanic and Anglo—expect to see them. What is common with the works of male playwrights is the frequent code switching:

DOÑA JUANITA

It's a little bit different, Doña Mercedes; babies get the colic.

DOÑA MERCEDES:

¡Ah, es la misma cosa!

[DOÑA JUANITA *suddenly turns, thinking she sees something off in the distance.* DOÑA

MERCEDES, *noticing, gets a bit excited.*]

DOÑA MERCEDES

¿Oué es, Doña Juanita? ¿Pasa algo por allá?

No, parecia, pero no. [*Disappointed.*] Nothing ever happens around here.

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12 Octavio Solis. "El Paso Blue". *Plays by Octavio Solis*. New York: Broadway Play Publishing Inc., 2006. pp. 89—139. p. 109.

13 Solis, p. 93.

DOÑA MERCEDES:

[*To Stage Left.*] ¡Uuuuh, ¡seria un milagro que algo pasara por aqui!

DOÑA JUANITA

¡Ay, don't be like that! We have peace and quiet here.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly to what we find in the plays of Solis and Mena, code-switching in the works of several contemporary Hispanic authors reaches a point where it becomes incomprehensible for audiences who are not equally at home in both languages. Simple and relatively rare code-switching in earlier works was a message to mainstream readers, creating a *couleur locale*, giving the mainstream audiences a taste of the original culture, enriching their knowledge about that culture, or merely entertaining them. Colloquial phrases, names of dishes and clothes well serve that purpose. In that sense, these texts are *transcultural*, as they relay messages to another culture. Transcultural text is a relatively new term; as Magdalena Roguska-Németh defines it, "Transculturalism has been one of the defining phenomena of recent years in many areas of the humanities and social sciences. It has been widely discussed within such disciplines as, among others, cultural studies, anthropology or ethnology."<sup>15</sup> Roguska-Németh's conclusions have been drawn from Hungarian literature, but they are equally applicable to Hispanic-American authors as well.

It is easy to see that a lot of the differences are mostly typological, as code-switching may be interpreted as a transcultural text, and the term transcultural literature has only emerged recently. The recognition that code-switching, intercultural, transcultural literature—whatever word is preferred at any given time—is important. It is also indicated by the fact that today special curricula are made to offer the high school students a selection of the best Hispanic-American literary works across the United States. The works are chosen according to their widely accepted quality, regardless of the amount of Spanish terms in them. Simple code-switching and virtually bi-lingual texts are equally able to deliver a message to a new, open and receptive audience.

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14 Alicia Mena. "Las Nuevas Tamaleras." *Puro Teatro*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999. pp. 149-176. pp. 149-150.

15 Magdalena Roguska-Németh. "Transculturalism in Literature as Reflected in the Works of Translingual Writers from the Hungarian Cultural Context." In: *World Literature Studies* vol. 14, issue 3, 2022 (35–47)

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