

# Code switching and the so-called “assimilation narrative”

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## Abstract

In literary theory, 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, who write in the language of their country, 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, erroneously applied. It is justified to make a distinction between *assimilation* and *integration* narratives, as the two are not the same. In the paper examples are provided from Hispanic-American literature (Mexican-American, Puerto Rican and Dominican), across a range of genres from prose through drama to poetry, and also, examples are discussed when the author does in fact seek assimilation, as well as stories in which neither assimilation, nor integration is successful.

**Keywords:** narrative, assimilation, Hispanic-American literature

## 1. Introduction

Assimilation and integration have long been burning issues on the European continent, where millions of ethnic minority people live in states other than their mother country, and recent developments, concerning the migration of what now appears to be millions of people into Europe, intensifies the debates. The United States has been proud of assimilating the crowds of people coming from Europe, Asia, Africa, Central- and South America. Today, however, it is more and more evident that what was often referred to as a “melting pot,” is a “salad bowl” instead. In a salad bowl the ingredients are mixed up, but clearly identifiable. Interestingly, an Italian educational website uses the U. S. as an example of the melting pot that assimilates people into uniformity, and the U. K. as the example of the salad bowl, “with people of different cultures living in harmony, like the lettuce, tomatoes and carrots in a salad” (cglearn.it). A

Norwegian website now refers to the U. S. as a salad bowl: “The term complementary identity is frequently used to characterize the immigrant possessing both an ethnic identity and a national identity as an American citizen. To explain this double identity we often use “salad bowl” as a metaphor. In the “salad bowl” metaphor each culture retains its own distinct qualities (the different ingredients in the salad), but has a sense of common national identity in the country of habitat (the salad).” (ndla.no)

These are but two examples to illustrate how perplexing the relevant concepts and definitions are. The terms “assimilation” and “integration” are often used as close synonyms; something is absorbed, made similar to something else. Often not even the best sources of definitions provide clearcut guidelines. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English defines integration as follows: “to become or make sb become fully a member of a community, rather than remaining in a separate group, e. g. because of one’s race, colour etc.” (Hornby, 1996, p. 620). The dictionary defines integration as a perfect synonym of assimilation. On the other hand, Webster’s New World Dictionary offers the following definition of integration: “the bringing of different racial or ethnic groups into free and equal association” (Webster’s 1986, p. 732). For this paper, the definition of Webster’s dictionary is accepted, that favours *free* and *equal* association, and contains no reference to full cultural-ethnic assimilation.

What a lot of minority authors—prose writers as well as playwrights and poets—seek and expect from the majority society is a chance for *integration*. Immigrants coming to a new country leave their old homeland behind because they seek a better life, better financial and business opportunities, or they want to escape from political or religious harassment. None of these reasons necessitates the complete abandonment of centuries-old religious, social, ethnic, dietary, clothing, building, etc. customs and traditions. From the point of view of the immigrants, integration is a considerably 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 their new country. The inhabitants of a territory occupied by another country will, naturally, see even fewer reasons for giving up their own civilization.

Linguistic arguments are (also) available to underpin the statement, and they, first and foremost, include vocabulary. Minority authors take pleasure in using terms of their native language in the text written for, and in the language of, the majority society. The “foreign” words serve to create an atmosphere of the culture of the source language for the readers in the majority society. At the same time, for many authors, using these words is a way of upholding their own cultural-ethnic identity in an environment ethno-culturally alien to them. Examples are taken from Hispanic-American prose, poetry and plays.

Hispanic-American literature was chosen because Hispanics—and, among them, Chicanos—constitute the largest ethnic minority in the U. S., and some of the conclusions may apply to other minorities. The period (cca. 1965-2000) was chosen because Hispanic literature became well-known and powerfully present in the U. S. with the advent of Anaya’s *Bless me, Última!* in 1973, after the emergence of the Chicano Movement in the mid-1960 that drew public attention to the situation of the Latinos. No particular selection criteria were applied; the works were chosen because of their position in the literary canon. A brief look at any of the works discussed here tells about the attitude of their author to their own ethnic background, and to the issue of

assimilation or integration. The time frame was introduced because the first great wave of Hispanic literary works accomplished their mission, drawing public attention to the life and problems—often the mere presence—of the Hispanic community in the U. S. Anaya and other authors wrote other works following their first ones, but they are not always received as favourably as the original ones. This is the case with Anaya; the only exception is perhaps Luis Rodriguez, whose sequel to the first part of his autobiographical story is praised by critics. No ideological-political poems like *I am Joaquín* are needed now, and Hispanic authors seek new topics.

The choice of the Spanish terms largely depends upon the personal taste and preference of the individual authors, but usually the things and concepts they find especially important are written in Spanish, and the ones with which they wish to use to attain a certain artistic or, sometimes, political goal.

## 2. Code switching in prose

Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless me, Última!* (1973) was the first major Hispanic-American novel that drew the attention of the public to the life of the Hispanic minority. The very title suggest that Anaya is interested in his own people. *Última* is a *curandera*, a wise old woman, a person in possession of the ability to cure. She uses herbs, potions, and a little magic. Anaya's novel was published in 1972, when the Chicano Movement, started in the 1960s, powerfully asserted their political, civil rights and, last not least, cultural goals. Anaya in this novel introduced regular code-switching as a means of giving his story a cultural angle and keeping the reader aware of the cultural background in which the story takes place. The benevolent witchcraft of the *curandera* is a symbol, suggesting that Christian religion, the Catholic faith of the Mexican-Americans can be brought into harmony with the ancient beliefs of the Aztecs.

Another major Hispanic-American novel, *Always Running—La Vida Loca—Gang Days in Los Angeles* (1993) by Luis Rodriguez came two decades after Anaya's work. Here again, the title itself contains code switching. The setting is different, not the pastoral idyll of the open meadows, but the suffocating world of the *barrio*. The *barrio* is the Spanish for district, and is universally applied to the parts in cities populated primarily by Latinos. A lot of people live a life far from normal and desirable; instead they have to live *la vida loca*, a crazy life in the *barrio*. It is not easy to break out of the vicious circle of violence, poverty, deprivation and inadequate education. For Rodriguez's protagonist, art and literature offered the chance. He went to the library, and under the suspicious and contemptuous eyes of the librarian he selected books for himself. The author describes this revelation as follows:

‘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, 1993, p. 138).

*Barrio* is so natural a word that the author does not even italicize it. He does italicize *una camarada de aquellas*, that is, “a comrade from the streets,” partly to indicate their common

Hispanic background, and partly because of the importance of his discovery. Then their similar social status is emphasized in English and half-English and half-Spanish: “street dude” and “barrio boy”. (p. 138).

The first edition of the “living Bible” for Rodriguez’s hero (in fact, Rodriguez himself) came out in 1967 and is, similarly to *Always Running*, largely autobiographical. Thomas wrote the novel as an adult, but when he was a young boy, he knew little about the dynamics of society, multiculturalism, assimilation, integration and such. The dark-skinned Puerto Rican boy wanted to be like the white men. To young Piri imitating the whites seemed to be the way of elevating his social status. Piri uses code switching when something important takes place in the story: for example, he wants to sleep with a *muchacha blanca*, that is, a white girl (Thomas, 1997, p. 93). Not because he could not have girlfriends, black or hispanic, but he definitely wanted a white girl. When he finally met one who was willing to sleep with him, he was so disgusted by the whites that he did not enjoy it at all. In the end, Catholicism and his experiences in prison bring him a revelation similar to what Rodriguez experience. He realized that being normal was cheap and easy, as compared to the life of a drug addict: “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, 1997, p. 328). *Panín* means close friend, an intimate pal, and the Spanish term here indicates the importance Thomas ascribed to his relationship to fellow “street dudes”.

Code switching is now a universal means of creating a special atmosphere in literature. An important, and similarly autobiographical novel is Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* (originally published in 1991). Alvarez is from Dominica, and fled to the United States from the paranoid dictator, Trujillo. She had lived an upper-middle class life in Dominica, they had automobiles, a swimming pool, exclusive parties, fancy clothes, and a lot of other amenities that most people did not have in the U. S. in the 1950s, let alone other parts of the world. The title suggests an assimilation narrative, and despite the fact that the Garcia girls settled in the U. S., had families of their own, they had lost their accent a lot before that, due to the excellent education they had been provided by their parents. When they return to Dominica for a visit after the fall of Trujillo, they immediately begin to look for their roots, their traditional drinks, music, although they are not disposing with what they acquired in America. They are successfully *integrated*, rather than *assimilated*, into American life. They preserve a lot of the traditional Hispanic way of life, family values and merits: “These Latin women, even when the bullets are flying and the bombs are falling, they want to make sure you have a full stomach, your shirt is ironed, your handkerchief is fresh.” (Alvarez, 2004, p. 197). Alvarez herself refutes the idea of assimilation with her own life, as she shares her time between her new home in New York, and Dominica, where she teaches local people to the methods of modern farming. Code switching is common all through the novel: when Yolanda returns to Dominica, she stops at a roadside *cantina*, and asks for *guava* juice. The *cantina* owner is unable to serve her that; instead, she proudly offers Coca-Cola, indicating how well supplied her *cantina* is. (Alvarez, 2004, p. 15).

Not everybody is, however, against assimilation. Sandra Cisneros in her *The House on Mango Street* (originally published in 1984), makes the American dream a strictly personal one, excluding ethno-cultural issues, and family as such. Unlike Thomas and Rodriguez, Cisneros

does not identify with the people living in difficulty; she wants to leave the whole misery behind once and for all. Her protagonists live in the *barrio*, but the term is avoided all through the short novel, although we even learn its exact geographical boundaries when somebody buys an automobile, and when they try it, they ride around the *barrio*.

Code switching is present at other places in the story: “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.” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 29) The author does not italicize tamales in the text when she uses the popular dish as a simile to present what she believes is a not very attractive image, grandfather’s swollen legs stuffed into the socks and shoes, like the meat is stuffed into the *tamales*. In the case of Cisneros, the melting pot does not fail to melt; it functions well. The desires of the author 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, Cisneros’ protagonist, Esperanza, wanted to leave behind her entire former life, including her heritage, with all the negative and positive features and examples. After rejecting the *barrio* as a place to live in, she rejects the food of her *raza*, that is, her people, as well.

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 titled *Sánchez* came out 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, 1991, p. 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 not some guilt, but his sense of unbearable loss. The values of the *norteamericanos*—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, the only degree to which he was willing to integrate. 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 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, 1991, p. 267). Sánchez chose the way of his departure, having completed his mission on Earth.

Juan Sánchez is not an educated man, he is a farmer, not a man of letters, but when he uses code switching in the short story, and he does, it is always some positive, uplifting term. He refers to his wife as *bellissima*, that is, the most beautiful one. Sánchez appreciates the savage beauty of the Sierra where he lives.

### 3. Code switching in poetry

Poetry has always been an important “weapon” in revolutions and social movements, and that is the case with the Chicano Movement, the movement of the Mexican-Americans to better their life and to assert their social, ethnic and political goals. The long poem titled *I am Joaquin* by Rodolfo Gonzalez is often quoted for its political, rather than poetic merits. The opening of the poem is a powerful example of code-switching:

Yo soy Joaquín,  
perdido en un mundo de confusión:  
I am Joaquín, lost in a world of confusion,  
caught up in the whirl of a gringo society,  
confused by the rules, scorned by attitudes,  
suppressed by manipulation, and destroyed by modern society.  
My fathers have lost the economic battle  
and won the struggle of cultural survival.  
And now! I must choose between the paradox of  
victory of the spirit, despite physical hunger

The first Spanish lines are repeated in English, showing that the poem was written for *both* audiences: Anglo- and Hispanic American. There is nothing about assimilation in it; the poem is a celebration of the Mexicans’ dual heritage: European and Aztec. The finishing lines leave no doubt about the opinion of the poet:

I am Joaquín.  
The odds are great  
But my spirit is strong,  
My faith unbreakable,  
My blood is pure.  
I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.  
I SHALL ENDURE!  
I WILL ENDURE!

For the prominent poetess, Gloria Anzaldúa, code switching appears to be more natural than writing in just one language. That is how she recommends her book in the foreword of *Borderlands/La Frontera*: “This book is dedicated a todos mexicanos on both sides of the border.” (Anzaldúa, 1987). Spanish terms are natural, organic parts of the text, so no

italicization is necessary. In her poem *To Live in the Borderlands* she still italicizes Spanish terms:

To live in the borderlands means you  
are neither *hispana india negra espanola*  
*ni gabacha*, eres *mestiza*, *mulata*, half-breed  
caught in the crossfire between camps  
while carrying all five races on your back  
not knowing which side to turn to, run from

(Anzaldua, 1987, p. 194)

The poetess gives vent to the same problems as Rodolfo Gonzalez and, similarly to his method, repeats some of the Spanish lines in English.

#### 4. Code switching in drama

Hispanic theatre has deep roots in American soil. The first thing that Don Juan de Oñate and his expedition did when they arrived at the Rio Grande was stage a play. Campesino Theatre, that is, the “Peasant Theatre,” was popular with the farmworkers movement and the Chicano Movement, growing out of that. Luis Valdez (re)invented the genre, offering support to El Movimiento from the stage.

Carlos Morton, Chicano playwright in his *Brown Buffalo* uses frequent code switching, and identifies his *raza* as a new one. Morton, who was born in the north, in Chicago, makes it clear that he does not want to see his ethnic community as an assimilated one:

Well, the **Abuelos** want brown **Raza** (people) like me to create havoc, to stir the winds of change. We're the bronze race, you see, and Tonatiuh is the Sun God. Bronze is the color of the sun, the color of the earth, as in **La Raza**. (The race). (Morton, p. 19. Manuscript, courtesy of the author)

Similarly to the two poets quoted above, and a great many other Hispanic authors, Morton emphasizes the dual-European and American-heritage of the Hispanic Americans. In Morton's play, the protagonists desperately seek a position in American society, but they are certainly not satisfied with the role and position of the underdog. They are not free of sins, and they are even ready to embark on criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, in order to earn the money they need to live at standards they long for. They attribute their disadvantageous situation, their inability to integrate, to their being *different*. That is what they, in turn, take pride in: they are the *bronze race*.

Octavio Solis, contemporary playwright from California, uses code switching so frequently that it is not always possible to understand some of his texts for a reader/viewer who does not speak BOTH languages with some fluency. The example is from his “El Paso Blue”:

Duane: Al, you owe me. We are camaradas, and as camaradas, we do for each other, we sacrifice.

Al: Yo no te debo ni madre, cabrón!

(Solis, 1994, p. 93.)

## 5. Conclusions

Even this handful of examples illustrates that minority authors are not attracted by the idea of assimilation. They do want to be a part of a rich country, enjoy the advantages that it offers, and are ready to contribute to the joint efforts creating that welfare, but without giving up their ancient linguistic, religious, cooking, dressing etc. traditions. It was not easy in most cases; rejection by the majority of the society, initially inadequate education for the minorities, deep-rooted prejudices on both sides hampered the process for a long time. Luis Rodriguez, at the end of his novel, comes to the following conclusion: “It's about time we become part of America.” (Rodriguez, 1993. p. 212). Rodriguez chooses his words carefully; instead of simply saying that it is time we became Americans, he talks about becoming *a part of America*. No assimilation is mentioned here, only integration. Robert N. Bellah's explanation and, at the same time, suggestion, is the following:

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, 1996, p. 167)

*Involvement* means participation, fulfilling one's duties as a citizen, without ethnic-cultural amalgamation, without being lost in a uniform mass of people. In this way, Hispanic authors have been able to sustain their ethnic-cultural background, and in the 21st century they will no longer need to fight against assimilation with linguistic means or other. Movie makers also reach back to the works that are now regarded as classics: Luis Valdez' play, *Zoot Suit*, was converted into a major musical by Universal Artists in 1981, and Anaya's novel, *Bless me Última*, into a movie drama in Gran Productions in 2013.

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