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The Notion of Cultural Assimilation into an American Identity: Abstract or Concrete?

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**THE NOTION OF CULTURAL ASSIMILATION INTO AN AMERICAN
IDENTITY: ABSTRACT OR CONCRETE?**

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**THE NOTION OF CULTURAL ASSIMILATION INTO AN AMERICAN
IDENTITY: ABSTRACT OR CONCRETE?**

By

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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Dedication

To my children:

Naithan, Jon, and Kyle you have always supported me in my efforts to get my college degrees. I could not have accomplished this without your patience, support, and understanding. I hope that my educational journey impacts your lives in some way.

You are the most important part of my life, I love you.

To Dr. Maggy Smith:

You have been wonderful to me from the first day I came into this program. With your support and encouragement I have grown academically; your kindness and understanding has helped me through some tough spots – both personal and academic – and has strengthened my self-confidence. Thank you so much.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Assimilated. The magic word. The end of a process that transforms immigrants into Americans. But does that really happen? To be American is to be equal to other Americans in societal, employment, and educational opportunities. But this is not and cannot be an outcome of the assimilation process in the United States. There are multiple definitions and expectations of assimilation; too many to allow a clear outcome. Additionally, the “differences” that generate calls for assimilation are often the same as those that designate an immigrant unassimilable. Incorporating these beliefs, different perspectives on assimilation, and a discussion of identity and definition, I will show why assimilation is an abstract notion, not a process with a concrete resolution.

There are many processes with clear outcomes, outcomes such as: high school graduate, college graduate, married, licensed driver, divorced, and teacher. For these results to be achieved, a process must be completed. The processes for each result may vary, but they are similar enough that achievement of the outcomes is not questioned. This cannot be said about the process of assimilation. There are many different assimilation processes and many different outcomes; no one outcome is agreed on by a majority of the U.S. population. Assimilated in El Paso, Texas will likely not be considered assimilated in Alabama. However, a high school graduate from El Paso, Texas will be considered a high school graduate in Alabama. There must be a clear, agreed upon outcome for us to be able to state that assimilation has a concrete resolution.

A steady stream of immigration throughout the world keeps assimilation concerns relevant, and expectations and perceptions of assimilation and immigrants continue to be

discussed and acted on. With the flow of immigrants come expectations of how they should fit into the host society, expectations that vary from country to country. The attitude in the United States toward immigrants and assimilation ranges from acceptance to a desire to strictly control all entry and behaviors. Other countries such as Germany, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands also have ongoing dialogue about where immigrants and assimilation fit into their society. Germans are shown to be strongly in favor of immigrants being absorbed into the host culture. Data provided by a Human Beliefs and Values Survey (HBVS) notes that 70% of Germans surveyed believe in integration to the culture of the host country as compared to multiculturalism (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 38). The HBVS data notes several other respondent countries strongly concur with Germany: Austria (82%), Belgium (72%), and Denmark (77%). France also believes in integration and is viewed as the “main proponent of assimilation of the European nations” (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart (36).

With the belief that immigrants should conform to the host society’s values and culture, comes the question of how conformation, or assimilation, is defined. Hein notes that Germany subjects immigrants to rigid cultural and moral values, such as changing attitudes about gender roles and sexual orientation, while believing it is impossible for immigrants to culturally transform to achieve what is considered the German “national spirit, culture, or essence” (162-163). In the Netherlands assimilation concerns are about the immigrants’ religion and the need for immigrants to learn the language of their host country. The majority of Dutch immigrants are Muslim, and their religion is believed to be in direct conflict with the values of the core community due to the perception that they do not believe in individualism, secularism, classic freedoms and civil rights (Entzinger 8). In 1994, the Parliament in the Netherlands changed its immigration focus from pillarization to integration. Pillarization allowed the different religious

and ideological communities to create their own schools, hospitals, newspapers, and other institutions, lowering assimilation expectations (Entzinger 3). Separate facilities were formed based on community identity. With the change in focus, schools no longer teach in the immigrants' languages; students used to learning in their mother tongue now struggle to learn in an unfamiliar language. At the same time, lack of integration was attributed to their insufficient Dutch language skills, providing an example of an expectation of assimilation while simultaneously placing obstacles in the immigrants' path (Entzinger 5). This concern about language skills is an example of a factor that generates a call for assimilation but can also be a reason an immigrant appears unassimilable.

The Danish immigration policy is very selective, handling assimilation differently than other countries. In Denmark a foreign spouse is not eligible for citizenship unless they are at least 24 years of age (Lane and Poon). This belief in limited admittance is reflected by Denmark's far-right political party, the Danish People's Party, which states on its website "we will not accept transformation to a multiethnic society" (Lane and Poon). As demonstrated by these examples, immigration and assimilation concerns are at the forefront of discussions in many countries and are not solely American concerns. While the United States is the focus of this paper, it is important to understand that struggles to define assimilation within the United States are echoed in other countries.

Each country formulates general definitions of expectations of immigrants at various political and community levels. These expectations are the components of assimilation. In the United States assimilation is linked to immigrants through the implication that "assimilation" (i.e. cultural changes) must take place in order to become "American." Although the meaning of "American" varies, for this discussion I use it as the concept of being American, related to

culture, language, and other individually defined aspects. This discussion examines the individually defined concept of being American, legally American but culturally not considered so. My research argues that cultural assimilation is determined by the formation and use of definitions, and the social and persuasive aspect of defining. The perception and definition of assimilation varies greatly, and this variance calls into question whether assimilation is simply a concept or something tangible that can be clearly achieved (consistently accepted or acknowledged). For this to be tangible it cannot be merely local acceptance, there must be a consistent, accepted definition throughout the United States. I will document how the broad range of definitional options of assimilation makes it impossible to assign a concrete resolution to an assimilation process.

METHODOLOGY

Assimilation is a concept associated with people from all nations, but the focus of this research will be Mexican nationals in the United States since they make up the largest immigrant population. There are many terms used for this population including Mexican, Latino, and Hispanic; I will use both Mexican and Hispanic, depending on the context.

My interest has long been the reinforcement of marginalization through the media, focusing on the subtle ways this is done. Several books clarified and expanded my thoughts and theories about assimilation and marginalization, bringing me to the point of this research. These books were Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Leo Chavez' *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, and Edward Schiappa's *Defining Reality:*

Definitions and the Politics of Meaning. After reading these books I realized that the perception of assimilation outcomes is a strong factor in the continued reinforcement of marginalization. To further expand on this, it was important that I examine the ways assimilation is defined, as well as the way it is used to compartmentalize the Hispanic population in the United States.

Once my subject was clarified I felt it was essential to do archival research to see what information already existed, and also to understand the effect of assimilation from multiple points of view. I added other writings by Richard Rodriguez to my reading list; his beliefs and experiences provide a critical perspective to this research. He is noted for turning his back on his culture and attempting to assimilate to a “white” American in order to be accepted and successful. The actions he took resulted from his views about what he felt was necessary to assimilate in the United States. Another important source was *Bootstraps* by Victor Villanueva. Villanueva is known for his influential perspective on race and rhetoric. Although Villanueva focuses more on inequality and difference than assimilation, the connection is clear. This is highlighted at the end of *Bootstraps* when he questions whether anyone is ever truly assimilated. Additionally, his academic path reflects the struggles of Hispanics to gain credibility in this environment. Mae Ngai is a Japanese-American who addresses immigration as related to both the Japanese during WWII as well as Mexicans up to the twenty-first century. She offers a unique perspective about the never ending “foreignness” of immigrants, even those who are American citizens.

Leo Chavez’ discussion is very different from that of Rodriguez and Ngai. He does not directly examine the action of immigration or assimilation but instead addresses a current perception of Mexican immigrants as a threat within the United States. This threat takes many forms: physical, economic, educational, and cultural. Chavez examines how these perceived

threats generate from misinformation, information purposely taken out of context or blown out of proportion. I use Chavez' Latino Threat theory to highlight how perceptions of Hispanics continue, and have been reinforced over time. As a result, the possibility of accepted Hispanic assimilation appears unlikely. Lastly, I have included Edward Schiappa's *Defining Reality* as a principal source. This book addresses how definitions come to be and how they are used to support, alter, or tear down conceptions of people and events.

Using ideas and thoughts from these books I created an outline to organize my theory of assimilation. The research is split into five sections: contemporary views of assimilation; identity creation; examining definition; the relationships between contemporary views of assimilation and definition, labels, and identity; and an alternate definition of assimilation. In Chapter Two I discuss contemporary views of assimilation, drawing from the viewpoints of Rodriguez, Villanueva, Ngai, and Chavez. Each of these authors address different elements related to assimilation although there are overlapping issues and ideas. Their opinions, information, and conclusions provided me with insight into the various perceptions of assimilation, and I was able to summarize the relevant aspects that will be used in my reflection of current views. To comprehensively understand perceptions of assimilation, I analyzed the ways assimilation is viewed by Hispanics such as Rodriguez and Villanueva, as well as how assimilation is discussed by Ngai and Chavez. *Defining Reality* was an important element of this analysis because definitions are always political, and word choice and use are critical when examining something such as marginalization. *Defining Reality* provided a lens through which to examine the different aspects and interpretations of assimilation.

The next section, Chapter Three, looks at how important identity is to the examination of assimilation. Identities are formed from labels and definitions and can categorize a person

throughout their life. These identities often designate which educational, social, and financial opportunities are available. Discourse communities are part of this discussion because they are a key element of identity creation and reinforcement, strengthening labels and definitions through the use of similar ideologies. These identities are then used to form, or create, communities. In this research the people within these created communities are Hispanics, but they have not self-defined to become part of these communities. Their identities have been conferred on them by people who believe Hispanics are very different from “Americans,” these identities are used to define a population.

Chapter Four explains how and why defining is important to this research, looking into how definitions come about, how they are reinforced, and their importance in the discussion of assimilation. Chapter Five combines information from the previous sections, examining the relationship of contemporary views of assimilation to identity and definition, and exploring how older perceptions persist and are reinforced.

The final section synthesizes the concept of assimilation, a discussion of definition, and current views of assimilation, to provide an alternate view of assimilation. Important information and ideas about assimilation were uncovered after examining the authors’ beliefs and actions discussed in these books. This information helped me solidify my claim about assimilation through the presentation of elements that previously were not perceived as related to the process of and beliefs about assimilation. This section highlights the contradicting aspects of prevailing definitions and uses of assimilation, and teases out a more accurate, alternate definition.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF ASSIMILATION: A REVIEW OF CURRENT BELIEFS

Contemporary views of assimilation are important to understanding the current status of this concept in the United States. The topic is regularly included in discussions about immigrants, but the validity of its definitions has not been questioned. Assimilation is loosely viewed as change, accepted as a step in the process of integration, but the innumerable beliefs surrounding it are not directly addressed. To help understand viewpoints in the 21st century I identified several authors, noted earlier, whose work and lives reflect on key aspects of assimilation. It is important to examine these aspects and document how they extract and highlight different facets and definitions of this concept. Contemporary views help understand the complexity of the concept and provide a foundation to assemble the other elements needed to generate a complete idea. These views also help form a better understanding of the concept of assimilation currently existing in the United States.

LEO R. CHAVEZ: SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE (*THE LATINO THREAT: CONSTRUCTING IMMIGRANTS, CITIZENS, AND THE NATION*)

In *The Latino Threat* Chavez discusses what he calls the Latino Threat Narrative. This narrative is composed of concerns linked to the Hispanic population in the United States, issues that are often intertwined with created concerns about assimilation. Chavez states that:

“The Latino Threat Narrative posits that Latinos are not like previous immigrants, who ultimately became part of the nation. According to the assumptions and taken-for-granted “truths” inherent in this narrative, Latinos are unwilling or incapable of

integrating, of becoming part of the national community. Rather, they are part of an invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering land that was formerly theirs and destroying the American way of life” (2).

The Latino Threat Narrative and Assimilation

Although the Latino Threat Narrative encompasses all who are considered Latino, the core focus is on people of Mexican heritage whether undocumented, legal residents, or U.S. citizens (Chavez 22). The Narrative is built from negative created identities and communities, and is strengthened by continued reinforcement through forums such as the media. For this discussion the magnitude and number of the “criminal” accusations are critical because of the presented belief that Hispanics are not assimilable. An example of the magnitude of the criminal classification is documented further in my analysis of Mae Ngai’s views and a discussion of Border Patrol agents. Chavez discusses the perception of Hispanic criminality, and establishes how this created identity is linked to beliefs about assimilation. The act of creating identities for Hispanics as a group reflects the desire in the United States to maintain a separation between different populations, and emphasizes the abstract nature of assimilation.

Created identities help divide the U.S. population into those who do or do not belong in the U.S. “community.” In *The Death of the West*, Patrick Buchanan argues that Mexicans have difficulty fitting in because they are of a different race than Americans, and “history and experience teach us that different races are far more difficult to assimilate” (Chavez 37). Buchanan’s argument makes a case for an inherent difference between those of Mexican heritage and those he considers Americans, placing all Mexicans in the United States into a permanently “other” category. Mexicans can never become American and so, in Buchanan’s eyes, can never

assimilate. A similar concern about Mexican differences and inability to fit in with the character of U. S. society is reflected in Samuel Huntington's remark that immigration from Mexico is an immediate and serious "challenge to America's traditional identity" (Chavez 22). These comments are a form of persuasion through their implications, presenting Mexicans as a permanently different population that will never fit into U.S. society. If these beliefs are accepted as true, it follows that Mexican immigrants can never assimilate, and will never become an integral or accepted part of U.S. society. These created identities present the hypocrisy of stating that immigrants must assimilate to become part of the American community. By viewing them as permanent outsiders, the demand for assimilation is irrelevant and impossible. Hispanic created identities include many additional elements, such as the perception that Hispanics are unassimilable, and can be grouped into a few main topics for easier examination.

Identity Perception through the Lens of the Latino Threat

The perceived Latino Threat, generated from created Hispanic identities such as those proposed by Buchanan and Huntington, is reinforced primarily using four categories: difference from "Americans," undeserving of inclusion, unwilling and incapable of change, and concerns about cultural change. This reinforcement gains strength in the media by "mind-numbing repetition," allowing accepted assumptions to be used to form narratives such as the Latino Threat (Chavez 41). Labels help to promote and reinforce differences between "Americans" and those of Mexican heritage: citizen/noncitizen, us/them, American/immigrant, legitimate/illegal, and American/Mexican. Michel Foucault considers this an example of how those considered "others" are represented as a threat to the nation through their perceived differences (Chavez 41). Antonio Gramsci's discussion of hegemony and common sense presents these dichotomies as a

process that promotes the values and attitudes of the dominant culture (Chavez 4, 41). The use of terms that create a divide between immigrants and Americans demonstrates the difficulty of viewing assimilation as an attainable goal. The created identities of difference generate impenetrable barriers that make “complete” assimilation impossible. Loyalty is another element used to enhance the barrier of difference; lack of loyalty is linked to criminality and an indifference to the United States.

Loyalty and Assimilation

The question of loyalty has been presented as a significant reason that Hispanics are undeserving of “American” status and not able to assimilate. Hispanics are believed to weaken U.S. political strength because of allegiance to their countries of birth (Portes, Escobar, & Aranda 3). Claims such as these are presented without evidence, as in the writings of Samuel Huntington who did not believe Hispanics could be assimilated (Portes, Escobar, & Aranda 3). The belief is that assimilation cannot be achieved if complete loyalty to the host country does not exist, in this case loyalty to the United States. Mexico shares a border with the United States and is easily accessible by Mexican immigrants. That proximity is used to promote the belief that because Mexicans can easily return to their country of origin their loyalty remains with that country, and because of that ease of movement Mexicans do not feel the need to transfer their loyalty to the United States. The events of 9/11 increased this concern about the ease of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, and although terrorists have not been shown to have crossed this border into the United States, heightened fear of terrorism generated an opportunity to question the loyalty of Hispanics and make them appear less assimilable (Chavez 21). This link between the

Mexican border and terrorism reinforces a created concern about the criminal nature of Mexican immigrants.

Undeserving and Unassimilable

The perception of undocumented Mexicans as criminal presents them as undeserving of inclusion into the American community. This perception augments the conflation of undocumented residents, legal residents, and U.S. citizens, depicting them all as undocumented foreigners, and raises a question about whether the concern is linked to only one or all of these groups. It speaks to the existence of a multitude of definitions, and links between both assimilation and the entire Hispanic population. Assimilation requires integration into U.S. society and potential Americans must be loyal and honest. The created disloyal, criminal identity of Hispanics does not allow integration to take place. This created identity is a key element of the belief that Hispanics are unassimilable, and do not deserve to be American. The existence of this label of criminality or illegality is a view shared by Chavez, Ngai, and Villanueva, and is important to the discussion of whether assimilation is abstract or concrete. Another element included in the call for assimilation is the belief that immigrants are often unwilling, and sometimes unable, to change in ways needed to become part of U.S. society.

Unwilling and Unable

Chavez believes that narrative about the unwillingness and inability of Mexicans to become part of society extends to immigrants' children and continues for generations, highlighting an element of created identities associated with the Hispanic population rather than with individual immigrants (26). A prominent feature of this unwillingness is the view that

immigrants lack the desire to learn English, something believed to be critical for successful assimilation. The belief that Mexican immigrants are not concerned with attaining that skill generates a negative perception. Chavez believes that assumptions about Mexicans within the Latino Threat Narrative portrays them as “unwilling or incapable” of integrating into the American community (2). This element of the Latino Threat Narrative combines with language difficulties to emphasize the differences presented through created identities. In a remark that embodies the perception of unwillingness and the inability to assimilate, a 1979 *U.S. News and World Report* article stated that “the traditions of Mexican-Americans remain undiluted, refreshed daily by an influx of illegal immigrants from the mother country” (Chavez 29). Chavez believes the article indicates that the supposed existence of undiluted traditions reflects how Mexican-Americans “did not assimilate into American society and culture” (29). Mexicans are presented as unwilling and unable to become part of American culture, in large part due to the constant flow of immigrants. If it is believed that immigrants are generally unwilling or unable to assimilate, then the call for assimilation is superficial. Believing that most immigrants are not going to change to conform to U.S. societal values presents the belief that there is not a true expectation of successful assimilation.

Static Culture and Linear Assimilation

The final assimilation-related element used to form the Latino Threat Narrative is the belief that American culture is static (Chavez 179). This assumption is derived from the linear model of assimilation in which immigrants are expected to completely give up their culture, and therefore their identity, in order to negotiate the one-way change to U.S. culture (Chavez 179). Linear assimilation is a process of homogenization and does not promote an equal contribution

of cultures and values over time. This correlates to Richard Rodriguez' belief that to assimilate immigrants must shed their existing identities and create a new "American" persona (*Brown 26*). By choosing to disregard everyday changes that take place in society, also ignored are cultural changes that occur as immigrants become part of the American community, calling into question the definition of American culture. As with assimilation, the meaning of culture can vary greatly depending on who is asked. The many perceptions of American culture are reflected in assimilation expectations; in particular the beliefs about what undesirable elements are brought by immigrants. These perceptions are enhanced over time in many ways; one way is media representation.

Media Representation and Reinforcement of the Hispanic Identity

Media representation of immigrant-related events varies across the United States and within cities, generating many different created communities and identities. Dialogue within discourse communities solidifies ideas about Hispanics and assimilation, and promotes these created identities as accurate. Unfortunately, the dialogue often designates this population as not only different but dangerous, and therefore not the type of people wanted as U.S. citizens or in the United States at all (*Chavez 21*). Definitions are created and reinforced over time, becoming accepted in public discourse. Representations of Hispanics in the media inform the public of where they fit into created communities, and demonstrate how differences are promoted as negative, reinforcing a divide that is difficult to overcome. This outcome plays a role in the definition of assimilation by accentuating differences in people and attaching a permanent social aspect to the characterizations.

The way an event is covered supports its connection to a created identity, strengthening pre-existing beliefs and reinforcing them through debates over immigration and national belonging. Media coverage assists the nation in welcoming immigrants or by creating obstacles for them, revealing how we define accepted characteristics in our nation (Chavez 9). This level of acceptance is transmitted through ideologies in discourse communities, promoting understandings of when to consider a person assimilated. Promoting different identities creates a wider divide between how Hispanics and white Americans are viewed, making the possibility of assimilation less likely. The perception of Hispanics varies greatly throughout the United States as do opinions of whether a Latino Threat exists; both are factors in the diverse definitions of the concept of assimilation.

All these views strengthen the argument that assimilation is only a concept, not something tangible that can be achieved. Reinforced differences ensure that assimilation is unachievable. Some people may be considered assimilated by others or they may view themselves as assimilated, like Richard Rodriguez. Those contentions should be questioned with an examination of the person's economic, educational, and social status in their community. The superficial requirements of assimilation may present a person as assimilated, but how they are treated in society, the employment and educational opportunities afforded to them and their families, presents the reality of assimilation for each person. There are so many variables that it is impossible to isolate a universally accepted definition that can be used, supporting the argument that assimilation is not concrete and achievable. The state of American culture, through a comparison of perceptions of Hispanics, the belief in homogenization, and the concept of melting pot, will be an important aspect in the continuing discussion about securing an accurate,

alternate definition of assimilation. These elements of assimilation are all addressed by Mae Ngai, highlighted in the following analysis of her discussion of citizenship and foreignness.

MAE NGAI: CITIZENSHIP (*IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECTS: ILLEGAL ALIENS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN AMERICA*)

Mae Ngai examines the perpetual state of foreignness attached to Japanese and Mexican immigrants in the United States from the early 19th century to the present, and their acceptance within the United States. The question of whether they are ever fully accepted into American society is connected to the perception of citizenship, assimilation, and the stigma of illegality. Definitions and created immigrant identities reinforce inaccurate perceptions such as these. Ngai notes that Walter Lippmann, a political journalist, believed words become “cues for a whole train of untold ideas...on which untold consequences can be based” (xix). Accepted uses of language reinforce definitions which generate beliefs about a subject. These beliefs can either create a comfortable environment for those targeted in the definition, or generate an uncomfortable and intolerant environment.

Volume, Intolerance, and Assimilation

Ngai believes that a high volume of immigrants generates intolerance, intolerance demonstrated by the use of words such as “alien indigestion” and “racial indigestion,” and through the promotion of eugenics and scientific racism (23). It is important to question whether this is a fear that through integration the high volume of ‘different’ people will create a drastic change in U.S. culture, or create a situation in which immigrants do not feel the need to change

or integrate into American society. Both options exhibit concerns about immigrants not assimilating to current cultural expectations.

The presence of intolerance creates a concern about the likelihood of assimilation. If American society is biased against immigrants it follows that acceptance is more difficult and less likely. This would be true even if an immigrant has assimilated according to a local definition; in an environment of intolerance the transition to full acceptance throughout a larger geographical area is not likely. This highlights the difficulty of obtaining a clear definition of assimilation and the problem of true acceptance of this meaning.

Worldviews, Commonplaces, and Unassimilable

Questions about assimilation definitions, intolerance, and acceptance are difficult to answer decisively because they are dependent on worldviews and commonplaces generated from social norms; the answers are dependent on the discourse communities in which they exist. The presence of large undocumented populations in Hispanic communities contributes to “construction of those communities as criminal and unassimilable” (Ngai 2). Does this perception of criminality extend only to the undocumented or are all Hispanics conflated, placing everyone of Mexican descent into this criminal group? If considered a criminal “illegal,” an immigrant can never meet all “requirements” of assimilation. Conflation of these groups indicates that the vast majority of minorities, who are U.S. citizens or legal residents, may find themselves automatically categorized as unassimilable, generating questions about what is included in the connection between definitions of assimilation and illegality. Does this undocumented status create a permanent barrier around that population, separating them from other U.S. citizens and those who are considered assimilable? Should those who are U.S. citizens

by birth be included in the Hispanic group that must assimilate? This speaks to the concept of borders and boundaries, defining and separating those perceived to have a lower status. It also demonstrates the numerous social criteria considered necessary to assimilation and, indirectly, to citizenship.

Defining citizenship in the United States can produce multiple meanings. Ngai notes that Americans of Mexican heritage born in the United States are viewed as “alien citizens,” citizens by birth but foreign due to their Mexican heritage (8). The belief in the consubstantiality of undocumented immigrants and those of Mexican descent widens the gap between populations defined as assimilable and those defined as unassimilable. It is important to examine whether this has any effect on the possibility of successfully assimilating. Ngai sees alien citizenship as a “condition of racial otherness, a badge of foreignness that could not be shed” (8). This notion demonstrates how an unspoken status of “unassimilable” is attached to Mexican immigrants, and perhaps everyone of Mexican heritage. Ngai’s belief contributes to the discussion of whether assimilation is abstract or concrete by questioning whether immigrants will always be separated from “Americans” through their perceived foreignness.

Always Foreign or Part of American Society?

Foreignness is an element of difference that incorporates aspects such as skin color, language, and customs. Assigning the label of foreignness to a person or population places them in a permanent category, as demonstrated by a question in the 2010 U.S. Census form. The question asks about Hispanic origin and requests clarification: Is this person (1) Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano; (2) Puerto Rican; (3) Cuban; or (4) another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. The Census does not isolate other ethnicities; by segregating Hispanics they are

designated as a permanently different population, further categorized within their own foreignness. The need to isolate Hispanics in government documents demonstrates how differences within the U.S. population are reinforced and validated.

Race and Criminalization

Race is also thought to be a factor in immigrant acceptance by U.S. society. Ngai believes Mexican immigrants are seen as unassimilable because they are different from Euro-Americans, and notes that the construction of racial hierarchies has been an ongoing project since colonial times (7-8). If Ngai's statement is accepted it brings forth an additional social factor contributing to the various definitions of assimilation, broadening the possibilities for defining this term. Paul Gilroy believes race is a socially constructed category of difference and that modern racial ideology is dependent on cultural, national, and physical differences (8). This belief demonstrates that differences among people of diverse nationalities are still a factor, highlighting how identities are created due to race, a created separation of "Americans" and permanent immigrants. Race and racial identity are inherently connected to assimilation because they help define the culture and customs that are expected to be altered in order for immigrants to become "American."

Omi and Winant state that "Race is present in every institution, every relationship, every individual. This is the case not only for the way society is organized – spatially, culturally, in terms of stratification, etc. – but also for our perceptions and understandings of personal experience" (158). Feagin and Elias suggest that systemic racism theory argues "white racial oppression and its hierarchal ordering are still very much alive and foundational" in the United States (952). They also believe it is misguided to claim that subordinated groups have voluntarily

assimilated to their position in a white-imposed racial hierarchy (Feagin and Elias 955). The concept of white racial oppression is substantiated in the criminalization of immigration, as viewed through the lens of the utilization of the United States Border Patrol.

Criminality and the Border Patrol

The work of the Border Patrol, and therefore the militarization of the border, reinforces differences by criminalizing the act of crossing the border without documents (Ngai 69). This highlights the connection between Hispanic communities, undocumented immigrants, and criminals, also reviving the question of whether the criminalization makes assimilation improbable in the minds of those holding this belief. The use of arms to prevent people from crossing into the United States defines immigrants as dangerous criminals before they ever arrive in the country. This created criminalization also supports Leo Chavez' claim of a Latino Threat Narrative. Fusing criminality associated with militarization of the border with the perceived Latino Threat creates a permanent, menacing Hispanic identity. Because this identity is connected to Hispanics' expected actions both before and after they are in the United States it cannot be viewed as inconsequential or temporary. This identity justifies the "dangerous" label attached to this population, presenting them as undesirable. These are the same people who could potentially be documented immigrants, or even citizens, in the United States. After initially identifying them as dangerous criminals, how can they be reclassified as assimilable once they are legally in the United States? The danger of the menacing Hispanic identity is emphasized in the way the U.S. Border Patrol is allowed to treat Mexican citizens.

Use of force by the Border Patrol accentuates the perceived differences between Mexicans and Americans, again begging the question of whether an expectation of assimilation

is valid or only an inducement for personal change. Several recent instances of Border Patrol agents killing Mexicans, resulting from rock throwing, documents the perceived differences. According to the *El Paso Times*, on February 19, 2014, a Border Patrol agent in San Diego killed a Mexican national who threw rocks at him. The unidentified Mexican allegedly threw rocks at an agent from the bottom of a 75-ft ravine; one struck the agent in the head. At that time, the agent shot the Mexican national an undetermined number of times, killing him. The agent, tellingly, required minimal medical attention and was not transported to a hospital.

The *Huffington Post* cites another incidence of a rock-induced shooting. On October 11, 2012, Border Patrol agents opened fire on a group of teens who threw rocks at them from the Mexican side of the Nogales-Mexican border. A sixteen-year old was killed. Also reported by the *Huffington Post*, a fifteen-year old Mexican was shot and killed by a Border Patrol agent in El Paso, Texas. The teen was with a group of friends who threw rocks from the Mexican side of the El Paso-Mexico border. In all of these cases the agents stated that they feared for their lives, even though two of these times the agents were on opposite sides of the border and could easily have removed themselves from the reach of the teens. In the San Diego case the assailant threw from a distance of 75 feet, again calling into question why the agent did not take the opportunity to distance himself, and even more importantly whether throwing a rock from that distance could realistically be seen as a life-threatening action.

At an extreme level, these occurrences can be viewed as a total disregard for life. When examining these actions through the lens of assimilation they appear to be a disregard for Mexican lives. According to a February 27, 2014 *Los Angeles Times* article, a report commissioned by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol states “Border Patrol agents have deliberately stepped in the path of cars apparently to justify shooting at the drivers and have fired

in frustration at people throwing rocks from the Mexican side of the border, according to an independent review of 67 cases that resulted in 19 deaths.” The report goes on to state that “people are being killed that don't need to be killed.” This research was conducted by law enforcement experts and suggests actions, such as shooting at rock-throwers, should be more thoroughly scrutinized. It also presents the view that Border Patrol agents believe infractions by Mexican immigrants, as minor as rock-throwing, justify killings. The actions by the Border Patrol agents and the law enforcement review emphasize the perceived differences between Mexicans and Americans. This also demonstrates the lower value placed on a Mexican life, a value in which a death because of rock-throwing is justified.

After considering actions such as these, as well as the perception of an undocumented border crossing as an extreme criminal act, it is difficult to believe that Americans will toss aside these negative perceptions and welcome immigrants with an opportunity to assimilate. How can it be promoted that going through the assimilation process will erase horrible character flaws such as crossing the border without proper documents, or even just having Mexican heritage? This does not sound like a society that believes in a positive outcome from an assimilation process, or one that wants to be made of a mixture of cultures.

U.S. Population: Melting Pot, Stew, and Other Mixtures

The depiction of the United States as a melting pot is a commonplace in our language, used to describe the mixing of immigrants and “Americans.” The belief presented is one of a collaborative society where cultures come together. A melting pot brings to mind a blending of all characteristics and traditions to create a smooth new one. This melting pot would include religious beliefs, holiday celebrations, language usage, educational beliefs, and familial

interactions. The frustrations expressed by U.S. citizens who do not want other cultural elements intermingled with existing customs highlights the erroneous belief in a melting pot. An example of this need to separate culture in the United States is highlighted in the 2010 Census question about Hispanic origin. Language is another component of assimilation that is used to create a separation of cultures. The push to ban bilingual education in schools demonstrates the desire to restrict, or eliminate, the use of a cultural element brought from the country of origin.

Both Arizona and California have placed restrictive proposals, related to language, on ballots through citizen initiatives (Reich & Barth 433). Not allowing students to learn in their mother tongue generates assimilation-related concerns. Learning will be more difficult; students may drop out of school or remain in remedial classes throughout their education. The educational level of many students will remain lower than Anglo students, and the students will not be proficient in the English language. Restricting bilingual education produces obstacles to learning and, consequently, assimilation. Using language and educational components important to assimilation as tools to slow the growth of immigrants presents another example of requiring something, but at the same time not allowing access to those required elements. This is a way of resisting assimilation by trying to minimize cultural change.

Describing the make-up of the U.S. population is difficult but leans heavily on one's perception of the United States in relation to its acceptance of immigrants. Horace Kallen described the United States as an orchestra (Ngai 231). Dr. Maggy Smith sees this mixture of cultures as a rich stew. These metaphors depict cultures that do not melt into one another and create a consistency in population. Instead they illustrate how the variances in population retain their identity while mixing with the rest of the U.S. population. "Orchestra" and "rich stew" depict a population that is varied, but where everyone is needed to produce a quality result. An

orchestra missing even one instrument will not produce a good sound. A stew with limited ingredients will be bland and unappetizing. Believing that the U.S. population is best described as an orchestra or rich stew means that retaining an interesting mix is good and assimilation as homogenization is not a priority. Even the representation of a melting pot does not portray immigrants in the United States as giving up their culture; rather it is blended into the existing culture. The question now is whether the use of “stew,” “orchestra,” or other metaphors depicting a mixture with clearly defined ingredients projects the immigrant population as not assimilated, or as an acceptance of different cultures within society.

Ngai’s research examines the way U.S. citizens with Hispanic backgrounds continue to be treated as foreign in their own country. This foreignness is shared by all Hispanics in the United States and assigns a negative element of race and class to this population. Border Patrol agents reflect this perception by seeming to place different values on the lives of Hispanics. The relevance of these events to assimilation is the perception of Mexicans to the U.S. Border Patrol agents and, even more, to U.S. society. If situations such as these occurred on U.S. soil, between law enforcement and a U.S. citizen, there would likely be a strong outcry questioning the necessity of using this extreme force on someone throwing rocks. When this population is criminalized inferior images are created of Hispanics, making it is easier to permit this type of action. After these shootings occurred, expressed anger was limited, the events were not highly publicized, and the agents were cleared of any inappropriate actions.

This is a dramatic reinforcement of what Feagin and Elias call white-imposed racial hierarchy (955). When situations such as these occur it brings forth the question of how Americans can say that assimilation should and can occur when it appears that it is not attainable. When a certain population is believed to have a lower, criminalized status, how can it

be believed that full assimilation and acceptance is possible? Many believe completing “the” assimilation process is possible, and if all requirements are met a person will be a fully accepted American in U.S. society. Richard Rodriguez is one of these people who believe. In the next section I will discuss Rodriguez’ views on assimilation, focusing primarily on culture and language. My conclusion about Rodriguez and the status of his assimilation journey is very different from his professed beliefs; I do not believe he has not been accepted as assimilated in U.S. society.

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ: CULTURE AND LANGUAGE (BROWN: THE LAST DISCOVERY OF AMERICAN AND HUNGER OF MEMORY: *THE EDUCATION OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ*)

As mentioned in discussions about Chavez and Ngai, culture and language are important aspects in the determination of assimilation expectations and outcomes. Lack of English language fluency is an element of the Hispanic created identity, and is essential in the connection to assimilation. Multiple assimilation models demonstrate the differing perceptions Americans have of what is necessary to fit into U.S. society. A multicultural model allows immigrants to retain their cultural heritage, yet be accepted as “Americans,” equal to other U.S. citizens, and does not take issue with immigrants speaking languages other than English. In the linear assimilation process, which drives a stronger call for change, immigrants are expected to completely give up their language and culture in order to become “American” (Chavez 179). The need for cultural change and lack of English proficiency are both key elements of the push for immigrant assimilation, showcasing the desire to have a static American identity. Zárate and Shaw concur, noting that most calls for assimilation focus on language because language is a

marker for prejudice toward foreigners (47). Richard Rodriguez agrees with this connection between language and foreignness, and the negative perceptions of culture retention (*Hunger of Memory* 7). His view is very important to this discussion because of his beliefs about assimilation; by his own admittance he grew up “wanting to be white” (Brown 140). He considers himself assimilated, but felt it necessary to reject his culture and distance himself from his family to achieve this goal.

Desire to Assimilate: Identity and Language

Examining Rodriguez’ beliefs, education, lifestyle, and physical appearance helps demonstrate that the goal of equality through assimilation is often, maybe always, out of reach. Rodriguez notes that from his first day of school he became a student of language and was obsessed by the way it determined his public identity (*Hunger of Memory* 7). He believes that to get ahead in the United States it is important to speak English well; the use of this public language, English, is critical to being assimilated (*Hunger of Memory* 7). This is one reason that Rodriguez turned his back on his culture, his first language, and ultimately his family. A connection can be seen between his parents’ difficulty with the English language and his need to separate from them, the desire to cultivate his “white” public identity and erase the Hispanic one. The connection between language and identity is also made by Ryan, Casas, and Thompson who examined intergroup perceptions, multicultural assimilation, and colorblind ideologies among Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites in Nebraska (29). They note that a national survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2006 indicates that “92% of Latinos said they believed it was very important that English be taught to the children of immigrant families” (Ryan, Casa, and

Thompson 31). This does not provide the breakdown of respondents as American citizens or non-citizens, but the statistic highlights the perceived importance of this social change.

It is important to emphasize the significance placed by both immigrants and U.S. citizens on English fluency and its connection to acceptance in U.S. society. This can be seen in Ullman's discussion of the English language learning program *Ingles sin Barreras*. Immigrants place a great deal of importance on owning this program even though it is expensive, \$1200 to \$3000, and too difficult to complete (453, 457-58). Bilingual education is an outcome of this struggle with English and is seen as important to the assimilation process. Rodriguez views this differently. Although he believes learning English is a key element of assimilation, he does not believe in bilingual education; "...they (bilingualists) do not realize that while one suffers a diminished sense of private individuality by becoming assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of public individuality" (*Hunger of Memory* 26).

Rodriguez' stance against bilingual education teases out several questions and beliefs. By denying immigrants' need for bilingual education Rodriguez attempts to distance himself and others of Mexican heritage from the Hispanic created identity. Eliminating the use of Spanish as a teaching tool may superficially alter this identity, removing a layer of difference by promoting the ease of achieving English fluency. Alternately, removing bilingual education from schools could promote Mexican immigrants as smart enough to learn without extra assistance or may reinforce the belief that secondary education is not an expectation for this population. Rodriguez' beliefs send mixed messages but clearly demonstrate the assimilation-related conflicts, even within one person.

Public Perception: White vs. Brown

Language is not the only barrier to assimilation, others, such as skin color, cannot be altered. Rodriguez is a dark-skinned Hispanic. He continually emphasizes his belief in assimilation and touts the benefits this provides, yet highlights the difficulty of the process by noting that in college students' "white appraisal," brown skin "became a coat of disadvantage" (*Brown* 26). This appears to show that he believes people with brown skin are grouped into a permanent category of disadvantage, although this is inconsistent with his steadfast belief in the positive outcomes of assimilation. Rodriguez appears to be more concerned with public image than with private feelings, calling to question whether the attempt to assimilate creates or increases self-doubt.

Rodriguez believed a public individuality was created through assimilation (*Hunger of Memory* 26). This, to him, was a positive attribute of what he defined as assimilation. What can be further examined is whether the notion of the achievement of a public identity should be defined as part of a created identity. Is this identity created by Rodriguez, is he pulled into an identity created by "Americans," or is it both? The question may also be asked whether this created public identity helped Rodriguez achieve the social status he expected. As will be further addressed, Rodriguez appears conflicted about his successful assimilation. He proclaims success while his comments reflect doubt.

Rodriguez associates assimilation with whiteness and money (*Hunger of Memory* 130; *Brown* 28). His focus on whiteness can be seen as a focus on "American," accentuating the abstractness of this definition as well as that of assimilation. He emphasizes that his education, housing, and even gym membership occur(ed) in places frequented by rich, white people (Rodriguez, "Hunger" 130; Rodriguez, "Brown" 28). Rodriguez chose to attend Stanford

because of its academic reputation, but also because that was where rich people went (*Hunger of Memory* 130). He believes wealth is important to success because working class families are detrimental to the advancement of their children, preventing or slowing the assimilation process (*Hunger of Memory* 46-47). Because of that, Rodriguez felt a considerable amount of assistance was needed from outside the family in order for assimilation to occur. His repeated link of assimilation, success, and wealth documents his expected outcome of assimilating. This also links the working class Hispanic culture with unassimilability; he feels wealth and education are indicative of an American.

Assimilated?

It does not appear Rodriguez achieved the outcome he hoped for after completing an assimilation process, but he must believe it is completed since he has declared himself assimilated. A contradiction appears in his stated belief and his comment during a lecture, when Rodriguez questioned whether a “person like me” should be considered a minority (*Hunger of Memory* 148). Although this statement seems to be an attempt to solidify his identity as a white American, he is also attempting to distance himself from Hispanics, a minority within his country. The important idea here is that he feels the need to emphasize the difference between himself and minorities as if he does not believe others understand that he has completed an assimilation process. This highlights again the existence of many definitions of assimilation. Rodriguez believes he has met the assimilation requirements, yet needs to make sure everyone is aware of that. One reason others may not agree with him is because assimilation has many definitions; there is also the fact that he is dark-skinned. His features continue to define him as a minority. Did he feel that the audience, knowing his credentials, would put him in a different

classification than other dark skinned men? That is something important to look at when examining the notion of assimilation, and speaks directly to my question. Even with all the ways Rodriguez has changed over time, do others consider him assimilated? This question showcases the reason assimilation is an abstract concept. Multiple responses would be garnered from respondents to this inquiry; responses that could both overlap and differ widely.

It is important to note that even within Rodriguez' beliefs, the beliefs of just one person, there exists multiple and conflicting thoughts about assimilation. This helps illustrate the potential existence of a vast range of assimilation definitions. The degree of assimilation "required" will vary depending on points of view. Although he clearly states that he considers himself assimilated, Rodriguez also declares it is "hard to say when a person ever stops being disadvantaged," calling into question this declaration of assimilation (*Hunger* 150). The statement also highlights a blurring of the social and personal distinction of assimilation. Rodriguez notes that the price of being a published brown author is "not being shelved by other authors one has loved," reflecting a separation of "white" and Hispanic he does not directly acknowledge (*Brown* 26). This appears to be a disconnect between his belief in assimilation and the reality of public perception, making me wonder whether he feels the process was worth the outcome.

The Price of Assimilation

In a strongly worded statement Rodriguez observes that the price of entering white America is an acid bath, a bleaching bath that burns away memory; creating the freedom to become an American (*Brown* 140). The irony of this metaphorical acid bath is that Rodriguez is unable to burn away the element that most clearly distinguishes him as Hispanic – his coloring.

With this comment Rodriguez demonstrates that this bleaching has not fully removed the metaphorical skin color attributed to him, the created Hispanic identity, highlighting the permanent difference between him and white Americans, a difference that does not permit “complete” assimilation.

Skin color as a barrier to acceptance adds a more personal tone to the assimilation discussion, but highlights the key role public perception plays in the process. Rodriguez provides an excellent example of how public perception relates to assimilation through a story about his friend Daryl, an African-American. Daryl told Rodriguez that he sees himself as “black because that is what the white cop sees when he looks at me” (*Brown* 136). Society’s dominant opinion is what controls communities and creates identities. In this example, Daryl shows that how he sees himself is overruled by existing dominant beliefs and becomes irrelevant. This comment supports the assertion that assimilation is abstract rather than concrete. Some populations will be defined by those around them, and it will not matter how actions, education, or social status change; the initial perception is generally what drives subsequent actions. Rodriguez feels assimilation is an important process that people choose to go through, an experience that transforms them into Americans. Although he does not state that he feels insecure about his assimilation, many of his comments give an impression of insecurity or uncertainty about his acceptance in U.S. society as an assimilated person. This supports the abstractness of assimilation. This abstract aspect of assimilation can also be seen when comparing the assimilation perceptions of another educated, dark-skinned, Hispanic, U.S. citizen –Victor Villanueva.

VICTOR VILLANUEVA: EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT (BOOTSTRAPS: *FROM AN AMERICAN ACADEMIC OF COLOR*)

Rodriguez' uses his life events to justify and defend his assimilation beliefs and actions, plainly stating that he sought to become "white" (*Brown* 140). In contrast, Victor Villanueva examines the path he took to become an academic, incorporating the way his heritage factored into the journey. His discussion contains many elements associated with assimilation even though he rarely directly discusses the process. When he does, he first states that he has never stopped trying to assimilate but that "complete assimilation is denied" (Villanueva xiv). His assimilation "attempt" occurs through his progress up the academic ladder, from elementary through graduate school, while Rodriguez' assimilation process is connected to social aspects: neighborhood, gyms, language, and friends. Villanueva examines the inability to achieve complete assimilation by exploring the domination of the Hispanic population in the United States through the use of ideology, hegemony, and colonialism. Everything is connected to his life experiences, which are linked to his education. Although this book is about his life, Villanueva's focus is the public perception of Mexicans in the United States. This public perception drives definitions of assimilation.

Created Identities

Created identities, or implied characteristics, provide the public with an impression of the Mexican people. This perception is woven into society through history, language, and culture, strengthening beliefs emitted through the media, discourse communities, academic processes, and familial interaction. Ideological elements necessary to continue these perceptions are promoted through what Gramsci calls civil society (Villanueva 125). These are institutions

comparable to discourse communities, where members have common beliefs related to the existence of that particular community, as well as similar ideological beliefs. This can be understood in the context of the Catholic community. The community exists because of members' belief in the teachings of the Catholic Church, but within those teachings members also agree on offshoots of the religion such as the right to life and birth control. The ideological elements within these beliefs are strengthened and continued through community rhetoric. Villanueva feels that "in rhetoric there is history and culture and language with personal and political implications" (77). Rhetoric reinforces existing notions and, in this case, promotes created differences and character flaws that require alteration in order to fit into U.S. society, the changes needed to assimilate.

The "Otherness" of Mexicans

Villanueva effectively highlights the perceived "otherness" of Mexicans in several instances throughout his book, providing an understanding of the different degrees of negative perceptions. In 1910, Mexicans were described before a Congressional hearing as "human swine" and as people whose minds "run to nothing higher than animal functions" (Villanueva 26). This belief, expressed over 100 years ago, presented a strong difference between Mexicans and Americans. A more recent *New York Times* article also emphasized differences between Hispanics and white Americans. This 2014 editorial discussed Republican Party concerns about future Presidential elections and the power of the Hispanic vote. Reviewing possible candidates, Sergio Bendixen, a Democratic strategist and authority on Latino voters notes that the GOP is considering Jeb Bush because he "speaks flawless Spanish and is married to a Mexican-American." This promotes the belief that a transition from a white American to being "like" a

Hispanic is necessary to receive support, rather than supporting issues that concern this population. This is a chameleon transition, containing an understanding that he will change back to a white American when it is not necessary to present his Hispanic self. For actual Hispanics, chameleon transitions do not exist. Their change is called assimilation, and it is a one-way road traveled in an attempt to become more American.

Villanueva believes Mexicans as minorities are in a “netherworld. Not quite American. No home to return to” (28). This perception of permanent difference, being not quite American, makes it difficult to believe that U.S. society is ever willing to accept Hispanics as fully American, to provide equality after one of multiple versions of the assimilation process has been completed. Differences are consistently reinforced, as demonstrated in the example of deciding on a viable Presidential candidate. Presented dissimilarities accentuate and strengthen the perception of Hispanics as others. The catch is that to be assimilated, to be equal, an American cannot be an other.

Labels, Differences, and Character Flaws

Labels highlight these differences and are both specific and general. Calling someone a dirty Mexican or a wetback is very specific. Broader definitions are highlighted by Villanueva who states “The question is often asked, and therefore reinforced, “what’s wrong with them?” (11). This broad question presents and maintains an accepted deficiency which can encompass multiple definitions. The deficiency is a Hispanic character flaw, something that is inherent to people of Mexican heritage, and something that cannot be changed. One element viewed as a deficiency is language skills, because of the belief that poor English skills equates to lower intelligence (Villanueva 11). Elements such as these provide a strong contradiction when

examined through the lens of assimilation. This “deficiency” – lower intelligence - is an obstacle to assimilation and, if inherent to Hispanics, something that cannot be overcome. To be considered assimilated this flaw, or deficiency, cannot exist. This is again an example of the creation of an identity inconsistent with successful assimilation.

Deficiencies

The accepted deficiency also highlights the generalization of Hispanic characteristics, demonstrating the racist aspect of assimilation expectations. Race is a factor that affects assimilation, and Mexicans are victims of racism because they are regarded as all alike (Villanueva 28, 42). This accepted similarity is seen when immigration authorities, Border Patrol agents, and other law enforcement agencies are allowed, even encouraged, to request documentation from people who “look Mexican” (Villanueva 28). Legally permitting this action documents a belief in the permanence of difference and inequality in Hispanics as compared to white Americans. Villanueva touches on this permanent difference when discussing Richard Rodriguez. He believes that although Rodriguez considers himself American, as compared to Mexican, a tension exists from trying to maintain that separation (Villanueva 39). The racial aspect of assimilation can be seen in Rodriguez’ situation; his ethnicity is apparent because of his looks and that can never be “assimilated.” The continued contradiction of creating a negative identity, and then making that identity a barrier to assimilation, highlights the impracticality of believing a person can be considered assimilated.

Colonialism

Labels, or created identities, have both positive and negative outcomes. As related to assimilation the labels serve as a method of keeping Hispanics in their place, separated from white Americans. Labels strengthen an existing hierarchy that places people of color below Anglos. Aspects of created identities, such as criminality, present negative depictions of Hispanics, reinforcing their “coat of disadvantage” (*Brown* 26). Because of this continued domination by white Americans, Hispanics remain a colonized people; portrayed as all alike, yet different from “Americans” (*Villanueva* 42). These characterizations help dehumanize this population, permitting actions such as those taken by Border Patrol agents – killing Mexican nationals for throwing rocks – to be repeated.

The hierarchy that exists in the United States represents a caste-like system which keeps minorities in their place. A contemporary explanation for caste is the internal colonialism *Villanueva* believes exists in the United States (31). He refers to a quote by Gail Omvedt that states colonialism is the “economic, political, and cultural domination” of one group over another (*Villanueva* 31). The call for linear assimilation is an element of colonialism because it asks immigrants to modify their economic, political, and cultural beliefs to mimic those of the dominant culture, white America. This expectation is unrealistic because an actual white America does not exist. The culture, language, and beliefs that currently exist are a mix from everyone living in the United States, compiled over time. Culture is not static, contrary to what the call for many variations of assimilation suggests. All definitions of assimilation do not expect a complete transformation, but as created identities and continued inequalities are examined, it appears that many Americans desire a transformation while holding the belief that it can never occur due to the permanent differences between “Americans” and Hispanics.

Language and Worldviews

Labels, colonialism, and disadvantage are reinforced through communication and, in particular, language is the method of reinforcement. Villanueva believes that language carries worldviews and is social (85). It is beneficial to examine this claim using two tools: Schiappa's analysis of definitions and Aristotle's belief that the emotional response generated from an audience is a key factor in the success of a speech. Schiappa states that definitions "put into practice a special kind of social knowledge" and present a shared understanding of various terms (3). Through socialization, credibility is assigned to definitions, and understandings about what constitutes assimilation are generated and reinforced. These definitions are the beliefs of the particular discourse community in which they are presented. As definitions of assimilation are communicated in discourse communities, beliefs in various worldviews are expanded.

Emotional responses generated from an audience as a result of a presentation demonstrate the level of success in communicating a worldview. Presentations are social in that they are interactions involving various forms of communication: oral language, body language, and visuals. Aristotle viewed rhetoric as a social phenomenon, believing that emotional responses demonstrate the engagement of an audience (18). Communicating definitions of assimilation are important to discourse communities because accepted definitions affect the make-up of their immediate community as well as future interactions in work, education, and society. Emotional engagement in a topic presents an opportunity to reinforce meanings, creating an environment of acceptance within discourse communities. Language has many nuances, and it is imperative to recognize the many ways they are used to communicate meanings and definitions.

Meanings are transmitted through rhetoric; people learn meanings by having heard them from others (Villanueva 85). A discourse community reinforces meanings by encouraging the

use or discarding of words, phrases, and beliefs. To become a member of a discourse community, no matter how large or small, you must have access to the language and behaviors of its members. Emotional encouragement provided after word use identifies which definitions are appropriate for a particular discourse community, assisting members in learning an accepted vocabulary. The validity of the significance Aristotle placed on generating emotional responses from an audience shows in the success of reinforcement of meanings within discourse communities. As more emphasis is placed on the existence of unacceptable differences between people, the less likely it is that an immigrant will be considered fully assimilated.

Domination and Boundaries

The social aspect of defining is reflected in Villanueva's reference to Gramsci's belief that hegemony is ideological domination (123). Gramsci calls ideological domination the act in which the dominant culture capitalizes on the acceptance of its worldviews as truth (Villanueva 123). Commonly held worldviews are seen as truths, and through acceptance of these truths the existing hierarchy is strengthened. Another way Villanueva describes this difficulty is that civil society endorses ethical beliefs and manners which maintains hegemony (125). The fact that the hierarchy exists and domination continues demonstrates that assimilation is not a concrete possibility. If assimilation were achievable there would not be a need for dominance of different cultural populations. It would not be necessary to continue to create identities and communities that reinforce differences and negative stereotypes. This can be understood as a concept of boundaries limiting or preventing access to "complete" assimilation, demonstrating the control exercised by the dominant class. Within these boundaries is the acceptance or use of various definitions of American and assimilation.

Barriers in Academics

Villanueva's academic path reflects existing barriers to assimilation. He has experienced all of the discussed concerns about assimilation: negative stereotypes, created identities, and attempted domination of the Hispanic population. Villanueva is educated, yet expresses a concern that he obtained his college position due to his ethnicity rather than his qualifications (126). If his concern is justified, it provides an example of the unattainable status of assimilation. Villanueva was born in Puerto Rico, is a citizen of the United States, is not a criminal, speaks fluent English, and has a PhD. Because he is a U.S. citizen by birth the other factors should be irrelevant but they are not. Although he has become extraordinarily successful and is a prominent scholar, his concerns demonstrate his insecurity about fitting into an academic atmosphere. Whether his inadequate identity was created by him or by others, the existence of this created identity demonstrates the perceived need to mimic white America. When that is not possible, the person is not fully accepted. The question is whether anyone is ever fully accepted, or whether there are always caveats to acceptance. Barriers to assimilation are highlighted in Villanueva's concerns; a person who has met the requirements to assimilate should have confidence in their position in U.S. society. The feeling of not belonging accentuates the boundaries separating those of the dominant class and those who feel, or are made to feel, the need to change to fit in.

Villanueva commented: "I have never stopped trying to assimilate. And I have succeeded in all the traditional ways. Yet complete assimilation is denied the Hispanic English Professor" (xiv). This statement, at the end of *Bootstraps*, sums up Villanueva's uncertainty about assimilation. A key thought is that he appears to be very confident in his status as a Hispanic, yet insecure about his status as an academic. He is insecure both in relation to assimilation and because of assimilation. This speaks strongly to the abstract nature of assimilation. If attainable,

if others have been shown to succeed there would not be so much insecurity about whether or not assimilation has been achieved, especially in a case like Villanueva's.

The link between Villanueva's discussion and assimilation is very different from that of Rodriguez'. Villanueva believes assimilation is imposed; he makes multiple connections to the negative perceptions of those of Mexican heritage, feeling that the use of these implied characteristics suggest change is necessary, thereby imposing assimilation on Mexicans (39). Yet even with this belief Villanueva worries that he has not achieved assimilation, and because of that is insecure about his life and career. Villanueva is connected to a Hispanic identity he may not agree with, but one that appears to exert a lot of control over his life. The creation and use of identities by dominant factions within the United States address differences between minorities and Americans. The Hispanic identity in particular is especially potent because of the number of Hispanics in the United States: U.S. citizens, legal residents, and undocumented residents. The strong connection between identity and the call for assimilation will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE IDENTITY CREATION

CREATED IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Assimilation expectations are assigned to people, depending on their identity and the communities in which they are members. Everyone is part of a community, some are chosen but others are created for specific populations. Often participation in these created communities is detrimental to its members. As noted by Jürgen Habermas, this can become a colonizing process where members are made to conform to a particular standard (Little, Jordens, and Sayers 75). Those given identities of “Mexican” are grouped with other Mexicans, assigned a generic identity that is believed to encompass Mexican characteristics. Members are placed in these created communities and assigned identities linked to low standards. The standards create labels that position members as “others,” justifying a perceived need for colonization by the dominant social class. Chavez’ discussion of the perception of a “Latino Threat” linked to all Hispanics highlights this class disparity. The Latino Threat suggests that Hispanics, regardless of immigration status, are a danger to U.S. society through their criminal status and cultural differences (23). Hispanics are labeled as different and expected to change through the assimilation process, but the designation as a danger to society creates a significant, potentially impenetrable, obstacle.

Created communities exist in tandem with created identities, and categorize people economically and socially whether appropriate or not. Expectations about assimilation are a way of linking people to created identities and communities. Expanding on Habermas’ theory that a result of involuntary participation in discourse communities is colonization, note that in created communities, members’ purported beliefs are not drawn from the members themselves, but from

the creators, essentially ascribing characterizations that are not true about most of the population. Believing that people of Mexican heritage must assimilate to become a member of U.S. society demonstrates the automatic assignment of an identity. Because all Hispanics are not alike and have different residence status in the United States, this connection is a reinforcement of the larger created community of difference. Members of a discourse community are believed to represent what that community endorses (Little, Jordens, and Sayers 80). In created communities, members represent what the creators believe the community stands for. This representation is reinforced through the recurring use of the community. When examining created communities through the lens of assimilation, a dominant feature is the emphasis on difference. This difference deems it necessary that immigrants' existing culture and practices be left behind as they move into American society. Richard Rodriguez believes "the price of entering white America" is a transfiguration that "burns away memory," reflecting the belief that a significant change must occur for an immigrant to become American (*Hunger of Memory* 140).

The Hispanic identity links the concept of assimilation to created Hispanic communities. Because of the need to create and reinforce a Hispanic identity, it is also necessary to create a community to house them. The continued attempts to define assimilation occur because U.S. society persists in the belief that there is a clear "American" identity, one very different from the Hispanic identity. In the same way that many definitions of assimilation exist, so do many created Hispanic communities because they are formed based on the various definitions of "Hispanic" or "Mexican." These multiple Hispanic communities contribute to the large number of meanings assigned to assimilation.

The definitions of assimilation and assimilated are constantly changing, and depend on numerous factors. As Mae Ngai states, Hispanics continue to be seen as foreigners in the land of

their birth (2). The created identity that links Hispanics and assimilation demonstrates how they are instantly and indefinitely categorized as different. Hispanics have been part of the United States population for longer than many U.S. states, but the concept of assimilation continues to be a barrier to “full” acceptance. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo conferred U.S. citizenship on Mexican citizens who chose to remain on land that became part of the United States yet, even after more than 150 years, Hispanics continue to be viewed as “others” due to created identities and the communities they populate. As noted by Fernández-Armesto, “even well-educated, amiable, open-minded people in the United States do not realize that their country has a Hispanic past...or at least if they do realize this fact, they commonly assign it no contemporary relevance or cultural significance” (xviii). He believes U.S. society is uncomfortable with the erosion of familiar customs, language, and way of life, highlighting a link between assimilation and fear (Fernández-Armesto xxvi). This difference is reflected in various realms, especially governmental and political.

POLITICS, PERSUASION, AND CONSEQUENCE

Defining is a political act with potentially negative consequences for groups created by political definition through laws, procedures, and categories to facilitate data collection. The U.S. Census form contains a question that specifically seeks information about the “type” of Hispanic a person is. Although this question explicitly notes that Hispanic origins are not races, it accentuates an already identified difference between Hispanics and other “Americans.” Segmenting Hispanics from the rest of the U.S. population creates an opportunity for data collection but also serves to reinforce the accepted difference between Hispanics and other “Americans.” The Census’ division of the U.S. population into Americans and Hispanics

promotes the “correct” definition of an American as one who is not Hispanic. The high number of Hispanics in the United States, along with the substantiated difference between Hispanics and “Americans,” increases the belief in a need for integration through assimilation.

Establishing authoritative definitions “requires a political process... that generates political results by advancing some views and interests and not others” (Schiappa 71). These definitions are often historical, such as the categorization of minorities within a census, or when used to marginalize a particular group of people through laws. Immigration laws provide an example of a way criminality is linked to immigrants; one way this has occurred is through the increase in the number of criminal convictions that require the perpetrator to be removed from the United States (Vasquez 655). Over the past five years, two thirds of almost two million deportations involved people who had either no previous criminal record or committed only minor infractions (Thompson and Cohen). “The records show the largest increases were in deportations involving illegal immigrants whose most serious offense was listed as a traffic violation, including driving under the influence” (Thompson and Cohen).

An example of this marginalizing, created, criminality can be seen in the case of Elizabeth Perez’. She is a 35-year-old American-born woman and former Marine whose husband was deported to Mexico in 2010, after he was detained during a traffic stop. At that time authorities found Perez had 14-year-old misdemeanor charges for assault and marijuana possession (Thompson and Cohen). While the publication of arrests such as these may not specifically invoke calls for assimilation, it encourages the perception of Mexicans as criminal and highlights their created differences which are part of created identities. The general belief that immigrant differences must be overcome links the criminality concern with the demand for assimilation.

Creating identities, defining people, is also a form of persuasion, established in many ways but particularly through repetition. The expression of an ideology, such as a belief about who needs to assimilate, is the presentation of a definition of a population or person. As this ideology is repeated over time within a discourse community it is accepted as true, giving those who agree a sense of confidence about their understanding and use of the definition. This confidence makes it easier to promote their perception of assimilation and identity in other environments. When the definition is repeated and accepted outside the initial discourse community the “correctness” of the definition is reinforced and persuasion occurs. The United States is a large discourse community affected by immigration laws, and as these laws reinforce created differences the public becomes more secure in their expression of and belief in Hispanic otherness.

Definitions presented by authority figures are a method of persuasion, primarily gaining strength through the semblance of power. Persuasion can occur in any discourse community and in all types of environments, because there is always a leader. Schools, places of worship, and the workplace are ideal because they contain captive audiences and an accepted hierarchy. Meanings of assimilation and definitions of certain populations, presented by those presumed to have credible knowledge about the subject, as in situations such as these, creates opportunities for definitions to be accepted without question. Social interactions are an opportunity to promote one definition over another, and in these settings beliefs about controversial topics such as assimilation and identity can be reinforced. When social settings are outside of a person’s discourse communities there may not be consensus, but the forum exists in which to present beliefs. This introduction creates the potential for future persuasion; after careful consideration a person may agree, or might hear the same beliefs expressed from others they consider

knowledgeable. These situations can generate a form of agreement or consensus about the subject.

There are consequences to the use of definitions: political, social, and personal, positive and negative. Political definitions can affect lives far into the future. From terms included in policies and laws to the credibility assigned to elected officials' viewpoints, interpretation and reinforcement of meanings will occur. The availability and quality of jobs, housing, and education are outcomes of social and political definitions, part of which are created identities. Cities throughout the United States have passed laws and ordinances denying the undocumented population an opportunity to rent housing. On February 11, 2014, Fremont, Nebraska residents voted to uphold a 2010 ordinance making it unlawful to rent to an undocumented resident (Lee). According to *Mother Jones*, Hazeltown, Pennsylvania and Farmers Branch, Texas have similar laws. Laws such as these highlight the damage that can be caused by created identities. These laws enable landlords to question the citizenship of anyone who "looks" Mexican. They also may result in the refusal to rent to a "Mexican-looking" U.S. citizen. How is this example relevant to the discussion of assimilation? Its relevance is shown in the potential to easily assign an identity of difference to all Mexicans. The perception of many differences between Americans and Mexicans encourages the call for assimilation because of the desire for a homogenous American identity.

With so many definitions of assimilation it would be impossible to fold them into one that incorporated most of the viewpoints. The existence of these multiple definitions highlights the futility of believing an achievable resolution to assimilation exists. The amount of power definitions have is dependent on factors such as what is being defined, who the audience is, and

who presents their interpretation. This interpretation is strengthened when presented through the media, especially when stories are sensationalized.

MEDIA AND OPINION

Public opinion is created and reinforced in many forums, but the media is an especially effective promotional tool, incorporating opinion in news coverage through story selection. News media are able to create environments in which certain issues or attitudes are dominant as compared to other stories (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 518). Opinion is a key component of how people are regarded by others, and can impact all aspects of someone's life. In our society, opinion drives the perception of different cultures and ultimately of each individual, because opinions are driven by definitions. The mass media is a source relied on for information to form attitudes about immigrants and immigration; both are invariably linked to Mexican heritage and assimilation concerns, resulting in a created identity (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 516). Rumbaut feels that the mass media are powerful organizations that steadily disseminate "impersonal messages and cultural propaganda" which shapes the public perception of immigrant groups (503).

Negatively promoting a particular population reinforces incorrect opinions, creates inaccurate identities, and generates a cycle of discrimination. The perception of danger, criminality, and illegality is posed as a general "Latino Threat," providing an example of a negative, incorrect reference assigned to Hispanics through a created identity. Although the media provides both positive and negative information, Villanueva believes that media is a cultural institution of civil society and is a way that society "endorses the ethical beliefs and manners which maintain hegemony" (125). Thomas McCarthy of Northwestern University notes

that media is a technology for “managing consensus and promoting consumer culture” (Habermas xii). The media controls which stories are presented to the public, assisting in the creation of identities and the reinforcement of others. This control can be viewed by again using the Latino Threat example. Varying opinions about Hispanics and assimilation are reinforced and expanded on through media-produced stories about Mexican immigrants.

Creating news events, or exploiting events that attract attention, is one way the media influences public opinion (Habermas 193). As noted by Rodriguez, in the early 1960’s the story Americans saw on television was that of “angry Chicanos...imitating the style of black militancy” (*Brown* 108). Although this event occurred over fifty years ago, Rodriguez emphasizes how story selection promotes a particular impression of groups of people. Impressions are not easily disentangled from other modes of reinforcement. Media stories can generate targeted ideas about immigrants and assimilation, encouraging people to think along certain lines (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 519). Television stories such as these can reinforce commonplaces expressed in discourse communities. Opinion management, in the form of mass media, utilizes dramatic presentation to reorient public opinion “by the formation of new authorities or symbols which will have acceptance” (Habermas 194). The sensational presentation of events like the 1960’s Chicano militancy utilizes dramatic presentation and helps reorient public opinion to perceive Hispanics as violent. This perception of violence is reflected in the Latino Threat Narrative, where Hispanics are seen as criminals and a threat to society.

Habermas uses the term “engineering of consent” to describe the process the media uses to promote or encourage the public’s acceptance or rejection of a person or idea (194). This is a process in which people are influenced subtly, without their conscious thought, speaking to people’s emotions rather than reason. Bentele feels that journalists reconstruct, not recount,

reality (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 519). Created identities and communities develop from this reconstruction of actual events. Friedrich Nietzsche, a late 19th century German philosopher, is said to have adopted the statement that a man proves himself not by what he does but by who he is (Habermas 13). In the case of assimilation and the media this belief highlights how the promotion of created identities for a certain population focuses on what they are said to be rather than who they really are.

REINFORCEMENT OF DIFFERENCE

Created identities and communities are at the heart of assimilation concerns because they generate inaccurate and misleading information about Hispanics. Emphasizing alleged differences and promoting immigrant criminality creates a wider division between Hispanics and the rest of the U.S. population. These differences are reinforced through social interaction in discourse communities, including schools, churches, the workplace, and at social events, promoting the “correctness” of definitions used. The call for assimilation comes from a concern about the perceived differences between immigrants and citizens. Unfortunately, created identities tend to conflate Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans, placing concerns about undocumented immigrants also on U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage. The conflation expands the pool of people included in the call for assimilation. Media sensationalism contributes to this conflation when promoting differences and negativity related to Hispanics.

The perception of Hispanics as different goes back farther than the acquisition of Texas, when Mexican nationals were given U.S. citizenship. Beliefs of otherness persist in the United States and are seen in the previously discussed contemporary views of assimilation, documenting the continued marginalization of Hispanics. This marginalization reinforces beliefs about the

need for assimilation. Contemporary views of assimilation provide a resource to examine how the notion of assimilation has affected public and self-perception of Hispanics. These views include personal reflections related to the assimilation “process” as well as what is believed to be the current perception of this population. These current perceptions help validate the theory that assimilation is not achievable but rather a notion that has an infinite number of definitions.

**CHAPTER FOUR
DEFINING “DEFINITION”**

What’s in a definition? Definitions indicate how something is perceived, incorporating related values and beliefs. Creation of a definition through word choice highlights perceptions and provides meanings believed to be interchangeable with that which is being defined (Schiappa 7). As seen in the previous chapter, definitions are the building blocks of identities which then present a perception of someone or something. There are many definitions of what it means to assimilate and these beliefs vary widely within communities and throughout the United States. The process and outcomes of assimilation are understood through the way it is defined. It is important to this discussion to understand how defining affects the perceptions of assimilation and how these definitions circulate within society.

Definitions matter because they show the different beliefs that exist in the United States about all subjects, whether controversial, positive, or neutral. Even dictionary definitions of assimilation are not consistent (see Table 1).

Table 1

A listing of various dictionary definitions of assimilation (emphasis mine)

Dictionary:	Definition:
Merriam-Webster online dictionary	To learn (something) so that it is fully <u>understood</u> and can be learned
	<u>To cause</u> (a person or group) <u>to become part of</u> a different society, country, etc.
	<u>To adopt</u> the ways of another culture: <u>to fully</u>

	<u>become</u> part of a different society, country, etc.
Dictionary.com	To take in and <u>incorporate</u> as one's own; absorb
	To <u>bring into conformity</u> with the customs, attitudes, etc., of a group, nation, or the like; adapt or adjust
	To cause to <u>resemble</u>
	To <u>compare</u> ; liken
Oxforddictionaries.com	<u>Take in</u> (information, ideas, or culture) and understand fully

Although the dictionary definitions listed above are general and expected to be neutral, they each have key words that present a meaning of the definition. The Merriam Webster dictionary notes that assimilation includes the need to fully understand. This can be viewed as understanding the existing beliefs of U.S. society but can include any number of things such as educational ideas, the way to dress, religion, the English language, and immigrant's place in the community. "Understand" can cover almost any topic. Another definition notes that assimilation causes a person to become part of a different society. How to become part of that society can be described in many ways, highlighting how assimilation is too broad a term to provide a concrete resolution. Dictionary.com defines assimilation as bringing into conformity, implying that the immigrant's current values and beliefs must be changed to emulate those of the host country. This summary of dictionary definitions underscores my contention that a clear and universally

accepted definition of assimilation does not exist, providing an example of why there should not be an expectation of a concrete resolution to the assimilation process.

ANTI-IMMIGRANT GROUPS DEFINE ASSIMILATION

Anti-immigrant groups present assimilation definitions from a different perspective than dictionaries. There are many of these groups throughout the country, and their websites proclaim the need to keep immigration under control. One of their concerns is the perception that Mexican immigrants are not loyal to the United States. The American Patrol, when discussing assimilation, states that immigrants must “become Americans” like past immigrants did. Fulfilling this request would require immigrants to comply with the American Patrol definition of becoming American, but their definition is very vague. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) believes that English fluency is critical to immigrant assimilation. The FAIR website, fairus.org, states that immigrants who are unable to speak English escape civic obligations. Examining what these two groups emphasize when discussing assimilation brings forth the wide differences in definitions. FAIR and American Patrol have similar ideologies about immigration and immigrants, but even so, what they stress as the important aspect of the assimilation process is different. When similar organizations do not agree on the definition of assimilation, organizations with dissimilar ideologies can be expected to differ even more, demonstrating the potential for a broad range of definitions.

SOCIOLOGISTS AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS DEFINE ASSIMILATION:

PRE-1950

Sociologists Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess defined assimilation in a 1921 article published in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Gordon 62). Their definition states that 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” (Gordon 62). In 1930 Park expands on that definition by stating that in the United States an immigrant is considered assimilated once they acquire the English language and become comfortable with the culture of U.S. society (Gordon 63). He adds that this assimilation is generally contingent on the person’s individual merits and not on race or culture (Gordon 63). Even though this definition of assimilation was presented almost 100 years ago, it demonstrates the invisible aspect of immigrants and presents the ambiguity of defining assimilation. Whether immigrants are “comfortable” with the culture of U.S. society is open to interpretation and will depend on who is defining and what part of the United States the defining occurs in. Additionally, the physical characteristics of the predominantly European immigrants of the 1920’s could be the reason for believing assimilation was not linked to race and culture. These immigrants were able to more easily blend into society once they spoke English fluently. Park and Burgess’ definition is still valid for some groups because of the varying beliefs about what constitutes assimilation. This definition was further developed twenty-five years later, by W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole.

Social anthropologists Warner and Srole studied ethnic groups and their ease or difficulty in assimilating in the United States. Published in 1945, their study notes that immigrants enter the United States at the “bottom of the social heap” (Warner and Srole 1). They describe the

American social system, the assimilation process, as “a system which performs the transmutation of diverse ethnic elements into elements almost homogenous with its own” (Warner and Srole 155). Ethnic and racial differences are viewed as inferior by the host society. Until immigrants can ‘unlearn’ these behavioral differences they will not be fully accepted into U.S. society (Warner and Srole 285). Physical characteristics such as dark skin also assign an inferior status to the possessor, creating a barrier to assimilation (Warner and Srole 285). Many Mexicans have this physical attribute, and are therefore permanently labeled as inferior. This label, linked to physical characteristics, cannot be changed and makes assimilation unlikely. Warner and Srole document that Hispanic immigrants experience a great degree of subordination in the United States (291). “The greater the difference between the host, the immigrant cultures, ...the longer the period necessary for assimilation into American life” (Warner and Srole 285). They believe that assimilation is a homogenization process, and when immigrants have unchangeable attributes they are viewed as unassimilable. This also documents that the greater the differences between Hispanics and white Americans, the more tenuous the possibility of successfully completing an assimilation process.

SOCIOLOGIST 1997 DEFINITION OF ASSIMILATION– HAS IT CHANGED?

In a 1997 article, Sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut examines what he considers a paradox - assimilation in the United States (483). He notes that the process of assimilation conflates “elements that are both empirical and ideological,” and describes assimilation as a homogenizing process where the immigrant discards their old language and culture and acquires the new (Rumbaut 483). His description is that of linear assimilation; it does not allow for the incorporation of the immigrant’s culture and values into their new American life. Rumbaut

believes there is a need to “spell out precisely and systematically what it is that is being “assimilated,” by whom, under what circumstances, and in reference to what sector of American society” (483). With this comment he underscores my assertion that the definition of assimilation is too vague and general to generate a concrete resolution, and that the definition is dependent on who defines and what part of the country they are in. Rumbaut further describes assimilation as a “process prescribed by social observers into a practice prescribed by the guardians of the social order” using built in assumptions that promote ethnocentrism (Rumbaut 487). These built in assumptions are reinforced when definitions of immigrants are used within discourse communities, and identified as accurate and appropriate. Rumbaut questions what the path to assimilation leads to, because it is difficult to identify precisely what it is immigrants are striving for. The multiple definitions of assimilation make it impossible to clearly state what the assimilation process is and what outcomes are expected once this process has been completed. Defining assimilation is difficult, and defining immigrant groups is a key element of the perception of the assimilation process. Definitions of Hispanics are linked to assimilation beliefs, and combine to generate broad, complicated, and sometimes confusing meanings and requirements related to assimilation.

WORD CHOICES AND OUTCOMES

A Hispanic can be described as Mexican, immigrant, illegal, undocumented, or in derogatory terms, wetback, beaner, or spic. In *Brown*, Richard Rodriguez notes that “no adjective has attached itself more often to the Mexican in America than “dirty” - which I assume gropes toward the simile dirt-like” (26). These different word choices demonstrate alternate views or definitions of a Hispanic. Assimilation is defined in a similar manner, through the choice of

positive, neutral, or derogatory terms. The different outcomes, the perception of what assimilation is or should be, depends on word choice used in the definition process. If definitions such as these are introduced into a developing vocabulary they can become part of a person's understanding of a subject without ever requiring an explanation.

Language development is an important aspect of definition formation and facilitates categorizing; this involves learning to distinguish between similar and different (Schiappa 18). At the same time, categorization facilitates defining by narrowing options for available definitions, by helping reduce a vast number of words into manageable groups (Schiappa 13). When assimilation is defined through negative word choices it generally places those who are believed to need to assimilate into a "different" category, different from those using this negative representation. If assimilation is defined in neutral or positive terms, the definer is more likely to demonstrate an acceptance or indifference towards the process or person. Socialization is one process that encourages this placement of meaning through categorization, and demonstrates the effect on immigrants.

Socialization into a community is part of the language development process, and involves "naturalization" of categories, the creation of commonplaces (Schiappa 18). The way words and concepts are categorized demonstrates beliefs attached to meanings. When a group of people has a common goal, norms, or interests, the group can be considered a discourse community. Language provides a mechanism for people to fit into discourse communities, through the understanding of definitions appropriate to use within a particular community. The repeated use of a word supports its definition within the discourse community; "correct" references are reinforced and encouraged, "incorrect" references are discouraged and corrected (Schiappa 29).

The negative use of assimilation is reinforced by considering it a “correct” reference to the process, while positive terms may be discouraged by the discourse community.

Definitions represent claims that connect words and concepts to worldviews and commonplaces (Schiappa 32). Shared realities are uncovered through agreements about the way something is defined; realities formed from identities and shared communities. These realities are presented through context and word choice, and both display perceptions. These perceptions then exhibit the realities shared by those using the same defining terms. The use of these defining terms can be a purposeful or unconscious attempt to persuade the listener that the meanings provided are correct. Beliefs about assimilation become shared realities within communities, and created identities are formed from these beliefs. Whether or not these definitions are promoted purposefully, their continued use reinforces their acceptance in discourse communities.

PERSUASION AND DEFINITION

Aristotle addressed persuasion through his belief that the character of a speaker and the emotional response generated from the audience were critical to the success of a speech (20). A speech is a definition, more specifically a lengthy arrangement of multiple inter-connected definitions. Persuasion through definition is demonstrated in the expectation that an audience will accept the meanings provided in a rhetorical action. Assimilation-related stories that appear on the internet, in periodicals, and on television are attempts at persuasion. No matter what the beliefs of the different media, they are attempting to convince the audience that they are the experts on a subject. It can be presented as exclusive evidence recently uncovered or as something “everyone knows” and should be accepted as such; regardless of the format, definitions are utilized in these presentations. As noted by Aristotle, if the rhetor generates an

emotional response his argument is more likely to be accepted. Use of the internet or television allows information to be easily taken out of context; quick, dramatic bits of information can be presented rather than the complete story. Sensationalized definitions, in the form of a news story or internet article, are an attempt to persuade an audience.

Definitions are persuasive because they encompass value judgments, both from the rhetor and the audience. The existing beliefs of the audience contribute to the difficulty or ease with which definitions provided by the rhetor are accepted. Defining assimilation as a necessary process for immigrants if they want to be an accepted part of U.S. society highlights the values of the presenter. The acceptance of a presentation by someone regarded as knowledgeable about a subject, or believed to be an expert, is an act of persuasion (Schiappa 30). Definitions accepted without question allow the reinforcement of meaning and demonstrates the ease of reinforcing misinformation. This misinformation can come from the generation of new commonplaces or the repetition of existing ones.

SOCIAL CREATION AND REINFORCEMENT OF DEFINITION

The social construction of defining is important to meaning reinforcement; it can encourage positive viewpoints or promote stereotypes. Stereotypes about Mexicans can be used to promote the need for assimilation, as well as certain requirements associated with that need. Schiappa believes that definitions constitute rhetorically constructed social knowledge, and create a “shared understanding” among those who use the definitions (3). This attaches authority to definitions, allowing them to become commonplaces and accepted without requiring a logical explanation or reasoning. Crowley and Hawhee state that commonplaces “refer to statements that

regularly circulate within members of a community” (89). Commonplaces are drawn from the commonsense of a community and can also be considered ideology (Crowley and Hawhee 89).

Meanings are generated through all forms of communication and are especially strong within discourse communities. Communities provide the context for a definition and for the success or defeat of how a word is used. According to Schiappa, the rules of use within a discourse community add to social knowledge (29). The encouragement or discouragement of the use of words develops an understanding of the social boundaries of a community.

Participation in communities may be dependent on acceptance of the members’ values, and the success and reinforcement of a particular definition of assimilation relates directly to these values. Participation in some discourse communities is not fully voluntary. For example, the population within a school cannot be controlled and most students must attend schools in their neighborhood. In educational communities it cannot be expected that all participants share the same values and beliefs, however the definitions presented within these institutions are an attempt at persuasion through their use.

LANGUAGE FLUENCY AND ASSIMILATION

The ways assimilation is defined reflects the diverse meanings associated with this concept. Language fluency is often presented as a key element for a “successful” assimilation; Zárate and Shaw believe that most calls for assimilation focus on language because language is an important socialization tool (47). Poor English skills marks a person as a foreigner. This categorization then places the person in a social class, conceivably without taking into account other factors that determine social standing. When examining his preoccupation with the English language, Richard Rodriguez stated that he was “obsessed by the way it determined my public

identity” (*Hunger of Memory* 7). Defining English fluency as a key element of assimilation provides an opportunity to immediately categorize immigrants. Rodriguez considered English to be the “language of public society” (*Hunger of Memory* 19). Those who are not fluent in English are quickly identified as unassimilable, perceived as unwilling to change and having divided loyalties. This categorization process highlights the social aspect of the definitional acceptance and reinforcement of assimilation meanings.

The connection between assimilation and English fluency is also made by immigrants. Char Ullman provides an example of the perceived importance of English learning to immigrants in her discussion of the English learning program *Ingles sin Barreras*. The meaning placed on ownership of this program reflects the significance of English proficiency to immigrants (Ullman 453,457-58). Bacallao and Smokowski also link assimilation to English proficiency. They believe the definition of assimilation means immigrants must learn English and conform to host culture norms, appearance, and behaviors (1). The difficulty of learning a new language is rarely referenced in these discussions, but Rumbaut notes that the ability to learn and speak a language is a function of age (502). Young children up to children in their early teens have the easiest time picking up a new language (Rumbaut 502). This fact adds another element to the language expectation, showing that although adult immigrants may want to learn English it may be a difficult process for them. Modifying the definition of assimilation through the acceptance of imperfect English skills in the assimilation process would help immigrants advance in all aspects of life at a faster rate.

In the United States, assimilation proposals usually call for only immigrant groups to change, rather than a blending of cultures (Zárate and Shaw 47). The definition of assimilation varies greatly within discourse communities, cities, and states, although they are more likely to

be consistent within discourse communities due to the social and political aspect of defining. Acceptance of immigrants into communities reflects the varying social definitions of assimilation more strongly than expectations expressed in laws or other legal forums. Different expectations of change, and thereby acceptance or rejection, demonstrates the importance a discourse community places on “official” definitions of assimilation.

The formation and use of definition is critical to understanding the notion of assimilation. Definitions help tease out associated beliefs and values that affect the way the term assimilation is used, and how this concept is understood. Context contributes to definition, shaping perceptions of certain populations and their role in society. Context and definition also generate self-defining environments in which members of the targeted population self-identify either how they see themselves or how they want others to see them. This self-definition can create conflicting identities for members of populations affected by the notion of assimilation. Created identities and communities play a significant role in reinforcing perceptions of members of created communities through the definitions of assimilation employed in this formation.

CHAPTER FIVE CONTEMPORARY VIEWS: RELATIONSHIPS TO DEFINITION, LABELS, AND IDENTITY

Contemporary views of assimilation are shaped through the use of definitions, labels, and identities; they depend on each other to produce meaning. Definitions are the building blocks of labels, providing specifics about a subject in order to more clearly assign a meaning to something. These labels, promoting their various meanings, are combined to provide an identity, a comprehensive picture of the term in question, which in this case is a person, population, or process.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CONNECTION TO DEFINITION, LABELS, AND IDENTITY

Why does it matter that definitions, labels, and identity shape the meanings of assimilation? Assimilation is a complex, often controversial topic that affects the lives of many people. Perceptions of the meaning of assimilation, exactly what the process entails, and who should go through the assimilation process all generate from definitions, labels, and identities. The way these are formed, shared, and reinforced is reflected in contemporary definitions and identities related to assimilation. To understand and address the current thinking about assimilation, it is important to examine how these views develop.

Multiple combinations of definitions associated with assimilation generate numerous meanings of this word. The process of developing these many meanings, as well as the complexity generated from them, can be seen using one state as an example. Within one state there are expectations of what assimilation means and what immigrants must do to assimilate. Cities within the state also have their beliefs about assimilation, but each city has had different

experiences and may add or remove elements, creating additional definitions. This accrual of meanings continues on down to discourse communities within cities, to families, and even to individuals. When you combine the varied beliefs from all states, the number of meanings of assimilation are too numerous to calculate, and extremely inconsistent.

Examining past perceptions can highlight older beliefs and help document which beliefs continue to exist. In 1921, Parks and Burgess defined assimilation as a fusion and an incorporation into American life (Gordon 63). In 1945, Warner and Srole state that assimilation is a cultural homogenization (155). These two views reflect the belief that immigrants should and will merge into U.S. society by losing the culture of their homeland and gaining that of their new country. Although these meanings of assimilation were developed over sixty years ago, they reflect the belief that immigrants should and will conform to perceived standards existing within U.S. society. Patrick Buchanan demonstrates this ongoing perception of difference in his 2001 book *The Death of the West* (Chavez 37). He implies that immigrants should fit in, but clearly states that Mexicans are not able to do so because of their inherent, negative, differences (Chavez 37). It is not possible for the entire United States population to agree on any one meaning about anything, but Buchanan's views, as well as those expressed by anti-immigrant groups such as the American Patrol and FAIR, demonstrate that negative definitions and beliefs about immigrants still exist.

GENERATING FICTITIOUS AND HARMFUL BELIEFS

Definitions give meaning to the words Mexican and immigrant, and often conflate the two. In some instances words included in these definitions may be educated, foreign, American, different, good, bad, intelligence, and illegal. These definitions and many others are used in

various combinations to create labels, which are then used to create identities. These identities are applied both to immigrants and to those of Mexican heritage legally in the United States. Definitions and identities are continually created, reinforced, and utilized to sustain the status of “Mexican immigrants” in the United States. This status is then used to determine in what ways a person is expected to assimilate. Mae Ngai does not feel assimilation can occur, that one definition of Mexican is “foreign” and implies permanent difference (8). Villanueva agrees with this definition of foreign, as shown in his statement that Mexicans are not distinguished from Mexican Americans (27). The belief in the connection between Mexican and foreignness, and their negative association, is echoed by Rodriguez who admittedly wanted to “grow up white” (*Brown* 140).

The definition of foreign is a component of labeling. Foreign has been defined as those who are not fluent in English, those who retain the culture of their home country, and those with dark skin (Rodriguez, *Brown* 140, 26; Villanueva xiv; Chavez 26). It is easy to see how intertwined definitions, labels, and identities are. As demonstrated in previous chapters, one identity – a definition of criminal - is anyone in the United States without documents, linking undocumented and criminal, but also linking Mexican and criminal since the majority of undocumented people in the United States are from Mexico (Chavez 22). According to the United States Department of Homeland Security, there were 11,510,000 unauthorized immigrants in the United States; 6,800,000 were from Mexico. “Different” is another broad term used to define Mexicans and Mexican immigrants. Different can be defined as those who have different values, a different primary language, and different physical characteristics.

These differences imply a permanent separation between “Americans” and Mexicans, and highlight the difficulty of defining the assimilation process. Important to this discussion is

the existence of multiple definitions of all forms of assimilate, creating a network of overlapping and combined meanings to choose from. Each definition of assimilate can contain different elements than other definitions. To further complicate this process, one form of assimilate, assimilable, is also a label. This exposes the overlap between definitions and labels; what they are depends on how they are used and they can be used in multiple ways. This vast number of definitions of assimilate are then linked with the labels and identities of a Mexican, demonstrating how the process can assign incorrect and harmful meanings to a person or an entire population. A created Mexican identity could include the labels: different, foreign, unassimilable, criminal, uneducated, and lazy. These definitions by themselves generally would not designate a Mexican, but combined they demonstrate multiple impressions of a Mexican. Reinforcement, however, can provide this regular connection between Mexican and certain definitions such as dirty, and support the perceived differences (Rodriguez, *Brown* 26).

Extreme criminalization of undocumented immigrants continues to be a common theme, as documented in two current editorials in the *El Paso Times*. A March 28, 2014 editorial discusses the illegality of entering the United States “without legal papers.” It goes on to question what law will next be ignored, “Murder? Rape?” The illegality of entering the country without following proper procedure can be acknowledged, but what should be scrutinized is the conflation of this “crime” with violent, dangerous crimes such as murder and rape. On March 29, 2014 another editorial cites concerns about criminal elements more easily allowed into the United States, believing that the drug lord will have “a mule with entry documents” and further states “I won’t even go into the terrorist aspect of this folly.” These editorials demonstrate both the assignment of unfair and inaccurate identities to Mexicans, but more importantly demonstrate the extreme perception of the act of crossing the border without documents. Comparing this act

to murder, rape, and terrorism highlights the reinforced image of a Mexican as a very bad person, not as someone that would ever be welcomed into U.S. society. The appearance of these articles in the newspaper also illustrates how reinforcement of beliefs such as these occurs.

WHAT DO WE TAKE FROM THIS?

The belief in the need for assimilation comes from the perceived differences between immigrants and “Americans.” These differences are highlighted by created identities assigned to Mexican immigrants. The created Hispanic identities are used to place people within the U.S. social hierarchy, through their perceived similarities or differences to Americans. When a static culture is assumed, it demonstrates how all immigrants will be viewed as different and needing change. Even when it is accepted that cultural changes occur regularly in the United States, the perception that immigrants have values and beliefs not in line with those in the United States generates a call for them to change. That call for change is assimilation.

Assimilation is driven by certain identity differences between Americans and Hispanics, and the belief these differences should not exist. Created identities describe a person or group of people and contain meanings that people choose to believe about a larger group of people. When identities are created they are more homogenous than they are individual, and are formed from a combination of labels. An example of this is the label assigned to those of Mexican heritage through the Latino Threat Narrative. According to Chavez, this narrative promotes the criminality of all Hispanics (22). This label is part of the Mexican identity. Forever foreign is another label, as noted by Ngai, Rodriguez, and Villanueva, who believe that U.S. society does not feel that the foreignness of a person dissipates over time. “Poor English skills and therefore uneducated” is a label discussed by Rodriguez and Ullman (*Hunger of Memory* 19; 453). This

concern about the use of English in the United States has generated conflict related to bilingual teaching and the creation of organizations to promote English Only. All these labels are used to create identities of Hispanics who need to change so they can fit into American society. The labels highlight the perceived deficiencies that are behind the call for assimilation.

The history of the definition of assimilation is important because similarities exist in the way it used to be defined and how it is currently used. The concern this brings forth is that the reinforcement of a meaning over almost 100 years ensures that it becomes a commonplace, accepted without question. It is much harder to discourage the use of an inappropriate and inaccurate word that has been reinforced and accepted for a long period of time. Words such as these also can be used without really considering what is being said. It is important to recognize that not just the words, but also identities and meanings have been accepted for a long time. These long-standing connections to the Hispanic population make change and acceptance both required and difficult. This cannot be addressed through legal channels; this is a matter of perception.

The belief that assimilation can occur, that it is a process with a concrete resolution perseveres through the discourse about Mexican immigration to the United States. My research shows that this is not true. The call for assimilation comes from a fear of change; often a fear that there will be extreme changes. Through domination, the Mexican people are told that the assimilation process will provide acceptance, will make them “American.” As you can see through my examination of respected academics, their work, and their lives, this does not happen. So what is a better definition of assimilation? Chapter 6 provides an alternate definition, and documents that there is not a concrete resolution to the assimilation process.

CHAPTER SIX EXPOSING ASSIMILATION AS ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT, ELUSIVE, AND AMBIGUOUS

Assimilation is an abstract and elusive concept that focuses on perceived differences between immigrants and “Americans,” rather than a process with a concrete resolution. The multiple definitions of assimilation construct barriers that highlight differences in people, assigning a varied and inconsistent number of conditions to completion of the assimilation process. These differences are often presented as negative, permanent character traits, aspects of a person that are not acceptable as part of the U.S. culture. Assimilation is presented as a path to becoming an “American,” encouraging immigrants to change, to be more like the dominant culture, but the continual distinction of differences between Hispanics and Americans make acceptance as an equal impossible. Rather than providing a path to equal treatment and opportunities, the many assimilation processes document the perceived undesirable differences in immigrants. Without true acceptance, assimilation cannot be a reality.

MULTIPLE ELEMENTS CREATE VARIATIONS OF ASSIMILATION

It can be acknowledged that at the most basic level assimilation equals change. The amount of change required and what constitutes successfully changing are dependent on definitions of assimilation and where the definitions are expressed. Generally, assimilation is presented as something required of immigrants in the United States, without questioning whether these changes are really necessary.

Identities and definitions are key elements of the multiple variations of assimilation. All forms of assimilation begin with the creation of definitions of difference between Americans and

immigrants, definitions that are then used to construct immigrant identities. The general call for assimilation as change is generated from these definitions and created identities. Assimilation as a process of change is another variation, and is also defined in many ways. Outcomes from this process are not clearly identified or validated, making the “process of assimilation” ambiguous and rendering a concrete resolution impossible.

The importance placed on assimilation in the United States is reflected in Hispanic self-identification. Because it appears that white Americans have more opportunities than minorities, Hispanics may compare their identity to an identity of an “American.” When this comparison reflects a sustained difference between the identities the Hispanic does not seem to measure up to the U.S. standard, creating insecurities and feelings of inadequacy. This comparison of a self-identity to an “American” can cause self-doubt, such as that expressed by Victor Villanueva. Villanueva questioned whether his position as an educator was justified or whether he was there because he was a Hispanic filling a quota. Although he is educated and successful he still hesitates to accept that his success is justified, because his identity is still different from that of educated, successful, white Americans. Even though, as a U.S. citizen, Villanueva should not have to assimilate, as a Hispanic he experiences the slights and mistreatment accorded to those who are different.

The conflation of Hispanic immigrants and Hispanic citizens generates expectations of assimilation for both. When Hispanic citizens are made to feel different, that they need to change to fit in, the viability of assimilation is negated. The created identities and commonplaces assigned to Hispanics – foreign, criminal, dangerous – document that they are viewed as very different, different in an unacceptable way. To trust that these labels would disappear upon acquisition of a paper showing them legally in the United States is disingenuous. The labels are

attached to immigrants before they arrive in the United States, and are attached to Hispanic U.S. citizens at birth. This naturalization of categories makes Hispanics permanently different, and the assimilation process an illusion.

PERCEPTIONS AND LABELS

Immigrants to the United States are primarily from Mexico, and the immigrant-Mexican and Mexican immigrant – U.S. citizen of Mexican heritage have become commonplaces. The call for the assimilation of immigrants reflects both the United States desire for cultural homogeneity and a concern about the assimilability of Mexicans. Created Hispanic identities promote significant differences between Hispanics and “Americans,” strengthening the fear that Hispanic immigrants are not able or willing to blend into U.S. society. The result is a permanent distinction of foreignness, the designation of permanently different. Additional commonplaces support this designation of difference, such as the perception of criminality brought forth in the Latino Threat Narrative.

The combination of multiple created identities and multiple commonplaces generate instances of unequal treatment of all those of Mexican heritage. This is demonstrated when the effect of a law is different depending on a person’s ethnicity, such as law enforcement’s ability to stop people depending on whether or not they “look Mexican” to verify citizenship. This constructs boundaries between those whose physical appearance is an immigrant commonplace, and all others. Passing laws that make certain discriminations legal, as well as enabling other discriminatory acts that do not have the force of law, provide circumstances which reinforce the existence of permanent differences.

The ability to legally stop someone based solely on physical characteristics emphasizes how difference is reinforced and encouraged. Although it may be stated that Mexican-Americans are not treated differently, Richard Rodriguez' example of his friend Daryl shows that is not true. How a person is perceived, what the other person sees when they look at this minority, is what they become at that moment. Daryl may be told that he is treated just like all other Americans, but in reality he knows that he is "black because that is what the white cop sees when he looks at me" (Brown 136). The superficial requirements of assimilation may present a person as assimilated, but how they are treated in society, the employment and educational opportunities afforded to them and their families, presents the reality of assimilation for each person. A factor in the definition of assimilation, and the belief of whether change occurred, is perception. The determination of what each judging person sees when they look at someone of Mexican heritage. Because it is impossible to agree on a perception, or even a few perceptions, assimilation outcomes cannot be consistent throughout the United States, and therefore is abstract, just a concept.

NEVER FULLY DEFINED

It can be agreed that immigrants are expected to assimilate, even though there are no laws to support that requirement. There are many definitions of why assimilation is necessary, what the assimilation process is, and when someone can be considered assimilated, but nothing that is consistent and widely accepted. As stated earlier in this research, Rumbaut believes there is a need to "spell out precisely and systematically what it is that is being "assimilated," by whom, under what circumstances, and in reference to what sector of American society" (483). He also questions what the path to assimilation leads to, because it is difficult to identify precisely what it

is immigrants are striving for. The assimilation process is an elusive concept, a carrot dangled in front of immigrants to show them what real “Americans” should be, and something that has no clear resolution. The perception of change is ambiguous, defined in multiple ways that are sometimes overlapping and often contradictory. Because of this variance, assimilation cannot be achieved and clearly does not have a concrete and accepted resolution.

The perceived differences between Mexicans and Americans generate the belief that assimilation is necessary for Mexican immigrants to become part of American society. These differences are created through the use of definitions, and then combined to form identities and labels. Because these differences continue to be reinforced in society through discourse communities and the media, the belief in the need for assimilation continues.

Many of these created identities are harmful and highly exaggerated, as shown in Chavez’ discussion of the Latino Threat Narrative. This perception of danger is also reflected in the militarization of the border and shooting by Border Patrol agents. The perception of foreignness and the conflation of everyone of Mexican heritage are demonstrated by concerns of U.S. citizens about whether they deserve their career opportunities, people who should not be connected to concerns about assimilation, because they were born and raised on U.S. soil. This application of assimilation requirements to U.S. citizens demonstrates the hegemonic aspect of assimilation, as discussed by Foucault and Habermas, and does not appear to be generated for the betterment of society.

Definitions of assimilation and assimilated are numerous, varied, and reflective of their point of generation. While similarities in definitions do exist, there are also great variances. Without a consistent agreed on definition of the process and outcomes there will never be a concrete resolution to assimilation, there are just too many different beliefs about this concept.

The most critical point to take away from this discussion is that the identities that generate the call for assimilation are very similar to the identities that categorize immigrants as unassimilable. The perceived differences in Mexicans are often the same differences said to be permanent, contradicting the stated purpose of assimilation. Until clear, concise, and accepted definitions of both the assimilation process and the outcomes exist, assimilation must be understood to be an abstract concept that presents the desires of U.S. society. Assimilation is not a process that immigrants can traverse with a resultant full acceptance into U.S. society. As documented in my research, it is impossible to assign the possibility of a concrete resolution to the assimilation process.

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