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El Nuevo Americano: Mexican American Integration in a Changing American Society

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**El Nuevo Americano:
Mexican American Integration in a Changing
American Society**

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Abstract

In this thesis, I describe the immigration debate that has taken place in the United States. I outline the traditional arguments of assimilationists and cultural pluralists in order to demonstrate how both groups of scholars fail to provide a relevant means through which specifically Mexican immigrants can integrate into American society. Strategies that once worked with previous groups of immigrants prove ineffective with Mexican Americans due to the sheer volume of this ethnic group received by the United States over the last forty years. I show how the influx of both legal and illegal Mexican immigrants, due to the presence of a shared land-border between the U.S. and Mexico, has created conditions that have yielded a hybrid border culture. I found evidence of this culture through scholarly and ethnographical studies conducted in the border city of El Paso, Texas. I found that the hybrid border culture forms as residents in these areas seek to find common ground on which they can interact with each other. I agree with a growing group of scholars that a new idea of assimilation is needed in order prevent the Mexican American population from segregating themselves from the rest of society. However, my addition is that I use the hybrid culture of El Paso to inform my analysis that a national common ground can only be realized through the inclusion of Mexican immigrants into the American political arena. Thus, my conclusion prioritizes a more streamlined pathway to citizenship as a solution to the significant presence of Mexican Americans in the United States.

**"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"**

-Emma Lazarus, Statue of Liberty¹

Chapter I

Introduction

The famous words of Emma Lazarus have greeted immigrants to American shores for over a hundred years. America is a country founded by immigrants, created out of the desire "to breathe free" from oppression and tyranny. By pledging allegiance, Americans declare the United States to be a place "for Liberty and Justice for all." Upon reading through the history of American immigration policy however, one finds that the United States is not all that it has pledged to be. Since its inception, the United States has deemed many unworthy of "liberty and justice." The irony is, U.S. immigration policy has denied access to countless immigrants on the very basis that there were some in America who felt those immigrants would erode the values of equality and justice, values on which the United States is founded. In America's attempt to remain a "city-on-the-hill," it built the hill so high that many could not get in. Nativists have sought to protect American national identity, and have thus called for the exclusion of anyone who they felt would destroy that identity. The United States has barred whole groups of people based on their differences from "the American."

However, as restriction gave way to openness in American immigration policy, many nativists saw assimilation as the only way to protect the spirit of American national identity. Like the nativists of the past, modern assimilationists view un-regulated immigration as a grave threat to American cultural values and the national identity. Fears of cultural dilution motivate them to

alert the American public to the dangers of a disunited American nation. With the emergence of assimilation came the rise of the cultural pluralists. These intellectuals see a value in increased diversity and seek to protect cultural differences of America's ethnic groups. They view assimilation arguments as inherently racist and Euro-centric, and they challenge any imposition of Western values on ethnic minorities.

The massive influx of Mexican immigrants into the United States fueled the fires of each of these arguments. Prominent assimilationists and cultural pluralists attempted to simplify the issue of Mexican immigration with sweeping and controversial statements endorsing either side of the debate. The deliberation reached its heights in the early 2000s, when the well known political scientist Samuel Huntington came out on the side of assimilationists. His book, *Who Are We? Challenges to American National Identity*, produced reverberations throughout the intellectual community. Opposition to Huntington's claims caused scholars to reconsider their views on the topic. A new camp slowly emerged: those who supported national unity but not traditional assimilation. This group of scholars noted the transnational nature of cities and states that shared a border with Mexico. The hybrid culture of these regions inspired thinkers to reconsider what it means to be American, and if that definition was as rigid as assimilationists made it out to be.

In this paper, I will develop the arguments of each group of intellectuals with regards to the immigration debate. First, I will trace the development of American immigration policy from the country's inception until the 1960s. Then, I will develop the arguments of both traditional assimilationists and cultural pluralists, culminating in a discussion of Huntington's book. Next, I will outline issues in Mexican immigration and why a shared border between the United States and Mexico makes these issues so unique and complex. I will use evidence from the community

of El Paso, Texas to illustrate the complexities of the U.S.-Mexico border region. I will conclude with an analysis of the changing definitions of assimilation and cultural pluralism that more accurately reflect the realities of our time. I argue that traditional assimilation of Mexican immigrants into the American mainstream is impossible due to the fact that America shares a large territorial border with Mexico. This shared border creates a hybrid culture in border communities that transcends assimilationists' assumption of a static, mainstream American culture. Successful integration of these immigrants into American society requires the encouragement of their political participation, not their forced acculturation.

Methodology

In the second chapter of this paper, I use mostly primary documents and scholarly articles critiquing those primary documents to create a historical overview of American immigration policy. In Chapter III, I use the bibliographies of both Huntington and his critics to construct the debate between assimilationist scholars and cultural pluralist scholars. In Chapter IV, I first use mostly Congressional reports and reports from the Pew Hispanic Center to construct a modern history of Mexican immigration and to provide key statistics regarding Mexican-Americans today. I then use sociological and anthropological studies to formulate the discussion of a "border region identity." In Chapter V, I use statistics and an ethnographic study to create a case study in El Paso, Texas. In Chapter VI, I then use scholarly articles that express new theories in assimilation and cultural pluralism. My conclusion, the final chapter of this paper, contains a summary of my own analysis and conclusions, followed by a discussion of how it relates to the contemporary immigration debate. I end with a section containing the limits to my research.

Chapter II: Past Immigration Opposition

History of U.S. Immigration and American Nativism

Migration has always been a key element in North America. Technically, the first people to set foot on North American soil migrated from across the Bering Strait more than 12,000 years ago. These people came from modern-day Siberia, in search of new land and opportunities, and eventually became what society deems now as Native American Indians.² Two centuries later, as the world grew smaller with the expansion of the empires of Western Europe, migrants from Spain, England, France, and Holland journeyed across the Atlantic Ocean to anchor their ships in American harbors. The peoples of Spain settled in Florida in 1565; the English founded Jamestown, Virginia in 1607; France took Louisiana in 1699; and the Dutch claimed Manhattan Island in 1620.³ Although contested by the Native Americans, this first wave of Western European immigrants would be the ones to create the United States of America, especially the English immigrants. Thus, history came to know them as the “settlers”—the ones who founded the American nation.

The immigration law in the United States reflected this strict definition of national identity. The Naturalization Act [of 1790] allowed “free white persons [of] good moral character [to] become citizens after two years of residence in the country.”⁴ Thus the precedent was set: citizens of the newly created United States of America had to be white and have the same cultural values as the original founding fathers. Eight years later, the 5th U.S. Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Act, which gave the President the power to deport any and “...all such aliens as he shall judge dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States, or shall have reasonable grounds to suspect are concerned in any treasonable or secret machinations against the government thereof.”⁵ Through these laws, Congress demonstrated that it defined American

national identity as white, culturally European, and opposed to any person or group of people that challenged that identity. These sentiments would be echoed for the next two centuries.

Through the 19th century, the U.S. government seemed to encourage immigration. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided free sections of land to settlers, both native and immigrants, across the American West.⁶ However, as immigrants rushed in from Ireland, Germany and Scandinavia, nativism captivated certain groups within the American population. Fears of "cultural erosion" inspired pamphlets and charged speeches that called for the exclusion of new immigrants from "their" society. The Know-Nothing political party emerged in the mid-1850s, standing firmly against Catholic immigrants from Ireland. The party compiled a collection of pro-American literature in 1855. The editor prefaced the book with a statement about the importance of its contents:

Neither Preface nor Apology is necessary to introduce to the American public a volume so thoroughly American in subject and in sentiment, and so purely a product of American talent and genius as this, which we proudly hand to the American reader. Having culled our bouquet from among the choicest flowers of native Eloquence and Poetry, we lay the Patriotic Offering upon the altar of American Liberty, believing that the incense thereof will prove a "sweet-smelling savor" in the nostrils of all who love the aroma of their Native Land.⁷

Fiercely anti-immigrant, the Know-Nothings stressed the dangers of foreign influence in American society. They stood at the political right of the Whig party, eventually splitting with the Whigs because of the party's inability to "echo with sufficient force and unanimity the mounting anti-foreign and anti-Catholic sentiments of their native-born Protestant constituents."⁸

Scholar Bruce Levine argues that this group arose organically from within the general population and not from a few political elites, demonstrating that the party's position on immigration stemmed from a deeper nativism stirring in the minds of many in the American public. Native-born citizens began to view the incoming Irish immigrants as "paupers and criminals, thus branding these newcomers as not only political threats to the Republic but also moral and

economic burdens on it."⁹ The Know-Nothings sought to protect American "Republicanism" from the enemy invasion.

As Irish immigrants continued to arrive in the U.S., they were met with hostility. Riots broke out throughout the country. In St. Louis in 1854, an election between U.S. Representative Thomas Hart Benton and Mayor Luther Kennett, backed by the nativist Know-Nothings, incited a riot between ineligible Irish voters and a "nativist mob." The fighting lasted three days and claimed at least ten lives.¹⁰

However, the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 marked the end of the "Irish threat." According to historian Richard Jensen, "when the War broke out the Irish rallied to the American flag, and joined the army...", proving their American patriotism and loyalty to Republicanism.¹¹ After the war, the Irish began to slowly assimilate into American culture. The Catholic Church built schools and universities throughout the country, and by the end of World War II the children of Irish immigrants were graduating from these schools and making their way into the "white-collar" world.¹² The Irish had successfully blended into the national identity of the United States, partly because they fit the white profile of Anglo-Americans and partly because they participated in American society without threatening the core beliefs of its people. The Know-Nothings lost political footing during the Civil War and disintegrated soon after. However, even though nativist sentiments no longer targeted the Irish, the next wave of foreign migration would rouse these sentiments once again.

With the outbreak of the 'gold rush' in the 1840s, Chinese immigration to the United States skyrocketed. Chinese laborers, eager to make money quickly to bring home to China, hurried to the American West. At first, U.S. employers welcomed the cheap labor, "but as Chinese laborers continued to arrive on the western shores, nativist resentment among organized

white labor increased and this sentiment drove the anti-Chinese movement particularly on the West Coast."¹³ Americans blamed the Chinese immigrants for stealing their jobs, and often times resorted to violence against the Chinese living among them. Cartoons pictured Chinese as the 'destroyer,' a menace to the American society.¹⁴ Political rhetoric did little to ease tensions. U.S. Senator John P. Jones warned Americans of the "tidal wave of barbarism... which is massing itself on our western borders."¹⁵ Many people saw the Chinese as degrading to their national identity, and called on the American government to do something about it.

The United States Congress answered with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The act prohibited all Chinese immigration to the United States for ten years, kept all Chinese in the U.S. from becoming citizens, and gave the government the power to deport any illegal Chinese immigrant back to China.¹⁶ Congress continued to renew the Exclusion Act until the mid-1920s. The act itself states that the reason for its indoctrination is that: "...the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof..."¹⁷ Americans saw Chinese immigration as a cultural threat, something that had to be stopped before it eroded the integrity of the national identity of the United States.

The debate continued well into the early 20th century. In the wake of its Industrial Revolution, the United States sought to protect its citizens against labor competition and protect its society from a culture it did not understand. The American Federation of Labor attempted to justify the actions of the government in a book it published in 1902 entitled *Some reasons for Chinese exclusion*. Along with other interviews and case studies, a man from the Federation of Labor (the largest labor union of the time), Rudyard Kipling, characterizes the Chinese as a race "that can swarm. These people work and spread. They pack close and eat everything and can live on nothing. They will overwhelm the world."¹⁸ Kipling's account paints a disturbing account of

the effects of Chinese immigration on American society. His language is reminiscent of the Know-Nothing rhetoric half a century prior. This is further evident in the conclusion of the article, as the Federation calls for and "expect[s] the undivided support of Americans and those of American sentiment in this great effort to save our nation from a similar fate that befell the islands of the Pacific, now overrun by Chinese."¹⁹ However, unlike in the 1850s, a government agency was now encouraging nativist attitudes in the American public. These documents prove that many in the United States did not feel as if the Chinese could ever be American citizens. Hence, the U.S. government chose to exclude them.

The 1882 Exclusion Act and the rhetoric of the labor unions in the United States point out another issue surrounding the immigration debate: the issue of class. Chinese laborers were targeted specifically because they were considered lower class people. People like Kipling feared that low-skilled, low-class immigrant workers would undermine the values of society. Many of their fears of cultural degradation stemmed from the expansion of the lower class due to the large influx of poor immigrant workers. These workers were thus discriminated against in part because they were considered the bottom of the societal hierarchy. This theme will continue to color some American's views toward immigrants even up until the present day.

Congress did not repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act until 1943 when it capped Chinese immigration at a total of 105 people per year.²⁰ Finally, with the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, Chinese immigrants could more easily obtain visas, especially if they had family in the United States.²¹ Following this Act, Chinese immigration surged, although the numbers were not nearly what they were in the late 19th century.²² Unlike the Irish population, the Chinese as a group were not even encouraged to assimilate. Many Americans saw them as completely foreign

and un-American. Perceived as a threat to American jobs and American national identity, Chinese immigrants were essentially banned from American life for over 70 years.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 proved to be the only major immigration law that excluded one specific group of people. However, through the first half of the 20th century, Congress continually sought to preserve the integrity of the U.S. national identity by limiting who could be a part of it.

On February 5, 1917, the 64th Congress passed legislation that prohibited many from "admission into the United States." These people included "idiots; imbeciles; feeble-minded persons... persons with chronic alcoholism; paupers; persons... certified [as]... physically defective...anarchists...prostitutes...children under sixteen years of age, unaccompanied by or not coming to one or both of their parents..." and natives of the entire Asia-Pacific region.²³ Furthermore, if an immigrant could not read, he or she would not be allowed a visa. The Act did allow for professionals, including lawyers, physicians, teachers and chemists.²⁴ With the exclusion of the aforementioned group of people, the United States government could decide who would fit into American culture and society and who would not. It gave government officials the power to turn away foreigners who they did not deem eligible for U.S. citizenship. In this way, some Americans were able to keep the composition of the United States closer to its perceived national identity.

Congress signed the next major piece of legislation concerning immigration in May 1924. "An act... to limit the immigration of aliens into the United States," the 1924 Immigration Act set quotas for the number of immigrants entering the United States based on the immigrant's nationality. The Act defined nationality as the country in which the immigrant had been born. The quotas reflected a ratio created from the 1920 census.²⁵ Thus, the U.S. government

established that the ethnic composition in 1920 should remain the same indefinitely. American politicians and the people that supported them sought to maintain American national identity as it had been.

Scholar Mae Ngai even proposes that the 1924 act "established... a global racial and national hierarchy that favored some immigrants over others."²⁶ The system of quotas ensured that race would become synonymous with nationality. Politicians commissioned anthropologists to determine which racial groups belonged to which country of origin.²⁷ The quotas distinguished clearly between the Western World and the rest of the world, and symbolically the numbers assigned to each nationality created a racial hierarchy that represented the ethnic preferences of American politicians at the time. Those who enacted the law created an opportunity to manipulate the composition of America's population. And, "at its core, the law served contemporary prejudices among white Protestant Americans from northern European backgrounds and their desire to maintain social and political dominance."²⁸

The remaining immigration policies until 1965 continued to maintain a nativist strain. Congress upheld the national quota system in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, while simultaneously excluding all persons tied with international Communism.²⁹ With this Act, Congress demonstrated that it could use immigration policy not only to control the composition of American society but also for national security purposes.

The Hart-Cellar Act finally abolished national quotas in 1965. Instead, it allocated visas based primarily on family ties and secondarily on the economic value of the immigrant. This labor was only enlisted if "a shortage of employable and willing persons exist in the United States."³⁰ Two competing philosophies split Congress in 1965 and both inevitably evinced themselves in the Act. In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, some in Congress felt that

immigration policy should reflect more "humanitarian values." Others strongly emphasized the need to maintain "American culture."³¹ Thus, the Act reflected both the need to support families and the need to protect American jobs from foreign competition. The Congressional debate over these ideologies represented in the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 would come to characterize the intellectual argument over immigration for the rest of America's modern history. Would this act push the United States toward a more liberal, pluralistic approach to immigration? Or would America continue to advocate for the integrity of its Anglo-Protestant roots? With the new wave of immigration, would immigration policy reflect the views of cultural pluralists or nativists?

Chapter III: The Debate

Certainly, these questions have received quite a bit of attention over the last fifty years. Around the time of the Hart-Cellar act, sociologists and political scientists began to question the direction that the United States was headed, and should be headed, with regards to immigration. Some believed in the importance of maintaining America's Anglo-Protestant roots. Like the nativists of the past, these scholars emphasized the need for unity, and urged the country to preserve the integrity of its *true* national identity. With the strict quota system of the 1920s abandoned, restrictionist thinkers became assimilationists. In the age of the Civil Rights Movement, scholars could no longer advocate for the restriction of immigrants based on their difference from the "white" norm of the Anglo-Saxon descendants. Thus, scholars began to advocate for the maintenance of the Anglo-Protestant *cultural* identity. Assimilation to the "American" culture developed into the new nativist war cry.

The opposition transformed as well. As America became increasingly liberal in its policies towards immigration, more and more scholars began to exalt the country's diversity over

its unity. Cultural pluralism, a term coined by sociologist Horace Kallen in the early 20th century, developed as an argument against assimilation.³² Liberal thinkers saw America's diversity as an asset, and thus started to encourage even more open immigration policies. The existence of immigrants would create a more durable, dynamic society—one that was much more in tuned with the original vision and purpose of the United States of America.

These two intellectual camps would come to characterize either side of the immigration debate. As the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act opened the floodgates for new immigration from Asia and Latin America, assimilationists felt increasingly threatened by what they saw as a direct challenge to American cultural identity. On the other side, cultural pluralists welcomed the different cultures of the new immigrants—they felt that cultural diversity could only help to enhance the American identity, not erode it. The massive amounts of immigration, especially coming from Mexico, only intensified the debate. Questions of what to do with the considerable inflow of Mexican immigrants—people with different cultural traditions than Anglo Protestants—impassioned scholars on each side of the intellectual argument. The debate came to a head in 2004, when renowned scholar Samuel P. Huntington came down firmly on the side of nativists in his book, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. This work exacerbated the battle between assimilationists and cultural pluralists. However, in order to better understand Huntington's argument, one must trace each side of the clash back to its roots, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Here, one will find that the arguments of both factions originated in the works of two sociologists: Milton Gordon and Horace Kallen.

The Assimilationists

Most of the modern ideas of assimilation come from the sociologist Milton Gordon. In his influential book, *Assimilation in America Life*, published in 1964, Gordon brought together the concepts of Anglo-conformity, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism for the first time. He used the umbrella of assimilation to address each concept and its relevance in American society. Gordon's analysis provided the foundation of what Huntington would come to talk about forty years later.

First, Gordon offered some useful definitions. He saw culture as “the way of life of a society, and if analyzed further [it is] seen to consist of prescribed ways of behaving or norms of conduct, beliefs, values, and skills...”³³ Gordon then used this definition of culture to explain the concept of assimilation as it was understood by the intellectuals of his time. By developing the arguments over time, he found that the term “assimilation” has transformed into acculturation to *one* specific culture instead of a “social process through which two or more persons or groups accept and perform one another's patterns of behavior.”³⁴ Thus, assimilation and acculturation for Gordon had become one in the same.

Gordon then moved away from a theoretical discussion of assimilation and towards a more practical critique of American progress. In his analysis, he proposed that immigrants to the United States make contributions to society “*by way* of cultural patterns that have taken their major impress from the [mold] of the overwhelmingly English character of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture or subculture in America, whose dominion in the United States has never been seriously threatened.”³⁵ In this statement, he reinforced the idea that the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon culture had never been seriously threatened in the United States. With regards to immigration, Gordon stated that, while immigrants would have a hard time assimilating into

“structural” society (institutions, etc), America had and should continue to push for cultural assimilation. Thus, he argued: “... the major efforts of immigrant-adjustment agencies, then, should be directed toward acculturation, or cultural assimilation.”³⁶

In one swift motion, Gordon set the stage for modern assimilationists. He provided the basis of the justification for cultural assimilation to the “Anglo-Saxon [mold].”³⁷ He discredited ideas like the melting pot and cultural pluralism as being purely theoretical and not practical in America. He saw acculturation as the key to a harmonious society.³⁸ Although Gordon did not speak to the superiority of one culture or the other, his theories concerning acculturation in American life up until 1964 portray an ideal that many subsequent intellectuals adopted. Furthermore, Gordon’s arguments proved to some the importance of assimilation of the immigrant into the dominant, Anglo-Saxon culture—the American culture.

After Gordon’s work, scholars such as Arthur Schlesinger used his ideas to advocate for the assimilation of immigrant groups. Focusing on the importance of unity, Schlesinger argued in his book, *The Disuniting of America*, that “countries break up when they fail to give ethnically diverse peoples compelling reasons to see themselves as part of the same nation.”³⁹ Although he was politically liberal (a prominent Democrat in fact), Schlesinger supported Gordon’s assertion that the Anglo-Protestant tradition still characterizes the American cultural identity. He proposed that, “the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition was for two centuries—and in crucial respects still is—the dominant influence on American culture and society.”⁴⁰

Schlesinger further developed the assimilationists’ argument in two ways. First, he not only acknowledged the Anglo-Protestant foundation of American identity but also advocated for the exceptional nature of that tradition. For Schlesinger,

Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source—the *unique* source—of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political

democracy, equality before the law, freedom of worship, human rights, and cultural freedom that constitute our precious legacy and to which most of the world today aspires. These are *European* ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption.⁴¹

Like the nativists of the past, some modern assimilationists still believe in Anglo-Protestant cultural superiority. Thus, they see little reason for or benefit to the introduction of other cultural influences to that national identity.

Schlesinger offered a second addition to Gordon's hypotheses: a fierce opposition to cultural pluralism. Although Gordon mentioned cultural pluralism as an unrealistic approach to immigration, Schlesinger, as did many of his fellow assimilationist thinkers, took this idea one step further. Using charged language and imagery, he put himself against "the threat" of "the cult of ethnicity," his term for cultural pluralists.⁴² He asked: "When does obsession with differences begin to threaten the idea of an overarching American nationality?"⁴³

The Disuniting of America reflects the ideas that assimilationists borrowed from Gordon's original work, and the additions that they have made over the last half-century. As the new, unprecedented wave of immigration washed over the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, assimilationists saw a mounting threat. For them, these immigrants brought with them cultures very different from those of the founding settlers. Nativist sentiment began to reflect, once more, fears of the dilution of American identity. Although it has now become a battle more about culture and less about physical race, the arguments echo those of the restrictionists in the early 1900s. Furthermore, assimilationists feel even more pressure from the new cultural pluralists. They respond, as Schlesinger did, by categorizing cultural pluralist attitudes as an "attack on the common American identity."⁴⁴ In this way, assimilationists depict both the incoming immigrant from places like Mexico and the cultural pluralists that in their minds discourage assimilation, as threatening to the coveted American way of life.

One sees the expansion of the assimilationist assault on cultural pluralists in Alvin Schmidt's book, *The Menace of Multiculturalism*, published in 1997. In the first pages alone, Schmidt urged that "...resisting cultural assimilation invariably produces...cultural tension, enmity, and conflict..." and the menace of multiculturalism is that it "encourages immigrants and other minorities to retain their foreign cultures by not assimilating into the Euro-American culture."⁴⁵ Schmidt firmly supported the Anglo-European foundation of American culture and never questioned the superiority of that tradition. He felt that multicultural ideologies pose a large threat to exceptional nature of the American people. With regards to education, Schmidt feared that multiculturalists were influencing schools in a way that is degenerative to American children—he believed that schools today emphasize other cultures and downplay the importance and greatness of the Anglo-Protestant foundation of American culture. To Schmidt, and many other assimilationists, "all cultures are not equal."⁴⁶ Valuing diversity of inferior cultures over unity under one superior culture seemed to Schmidt as the worst crime against American society.

With Schmidt's piece, one finds the final element of the modern assimilationist argument: the problem of Hispanic, and specifically Mexican, immigration. First, Schmidt highlighted the cultural differences of Hispanic immigrants to the American population. Quoting past scholars, Schmidt pointed out that, "Latin America places more emphasis on luck, heroism, status, and *figura* than the relatively 'Protestant' ethic of North America which values diligence, regularity, and the responsible seizure of opportunities."⁴⁷ With the cultural differences aforementioned, coupled with a close geographic proximity that allows for groups of immigrants from say, Mexico, to retain their cultural inclinations toward their homeland, Mexican immigration posed a formidable challenge for American natives.⁴⁸ He portrayed the failure of

assimilation, as most other assimilationists do, as disastrous: “If America loses the ability to assimilate many into one... [it] it will have lost its soul.”⁴⁹

Taken together, the works of Gordon, Schlesinger and Schmidt nicely outline the assimilationist argument. It is based on the assumed dominance of the Anglo-Protestant tradition in American cultural identity. These scholars saw this as the ideal for American society—they believed that this tradition represented the original intentions of the founding settlers of the American nation and advocate for its continued prevalence in American culture. Many assimilationists today view the arrival of new immigrants from especially Mexico and Latin America as a threat to this American cultural identity because their numbers and cultural differences make them more adverse to assimilation into an essentially Anglo-Protestant society. Finally, they are similarly threatened by those cultural pluralists who they think promote more open immigration policies and host anti-assimilation sentiments. Of course, this depiction of assimilationists does not represent the entire group, as we will see later in this paper. However, it does represent the ideologies of conservative assimilationists inclined toward nativism. It is with this group that Samuel Huntington aligns himself with. Before outlining Huntington’s arguments, however, it is important to first delve into the opposing side of the immigration debate in order to understand the complexities of the issue with which Huntington attempts to grapple.

The Cultural Pluralists

The prominent sociologist, Horace Kallen, first coined the term “cultural pluralism” in the early 1900s. He later developed the concept in his book, *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea*, published in 1956. He posed his work as a counter to the assimilation arguments

so pervasive through American history. He instead advocated for an individual's contribution to a living, dynamic society as the formation of a true national identity.

First, Kallen provided a definition of culture that is very different from Gordon's definition. Gordon described culture as: the "point of impact and experience of an unperceived, unknown, even unsuspected, formation of faiths, works, ways and speech whose communal singularity" forms a certain way of life.⁵⁰ According to Kallen's argument, culture is thus the accumulation of *individual experiences* that, when taken together in a group, create a fluid definition of one group versus another. Individuals can choose to enter or leave these groups, affecting each culture in turn. Kallen argued that the freedom of individuals to come and go was the basis of diversity. Additionally, "the more [groups an individual] can join or leave, the more varied their forms and functions, the more abundant, the freer, the richer, the more civilized" the group or culture will be.⁵¹ Essentially, the more cultural diversity there is the more freedoms individuals enjoy.

Kallen then positioned his opposition to assimilation: "The propensity to 'assimilate' the culturally diverse, converting the differences into sameness with one's own culture...tends to be excreted, isolated, destroyed, as an offense, an unworthiness, a foe of the good, the true and the beautiful."⁵² Assimilation thus, in Kallen's mind, led to the erosion of culture—it is the antithesis of cultural diversity and freedom. Given this, if a powerful culture seeks to "impose its creeds and codes and install its works and ways" on a minority culture, it will be doomed to fail. This will occur either because it will be stifled, cut off from the world and progress, or because "it [will suffer] defeat at the hands of another culture whose diversity it has treated as an adversity."⁵³ Although his language is a bit dramatic, Kallen succeeded in highlighting his fears of forced assimilation to one culture, the very thing assimilationists campaign for.

Kallen ended positively, with a celebration of a diverse culture over a homogeneous one. He proposed that, “a living culture is a changing culture; and it is a changing culture... because of the transactions wherewith living, altering, individuals transform old thoughts and things while laboring to preserve them and to produce new.”⁵⁴ Culture is not static—in order for culture to survive, it has to be continuously enhanced by new individuals with their own cultures and ideas. He thus saw a triumphant America as a nation that “brought something new into the world;” a place that allowed all people to continuously shape and mold its identity to make it better.⁵⁵

This argument proved fundamental to the birth of cultural pluralism theory. Kallen challenged the idea of a historic Anglo-Protestant American identity by claiming that culture should be fluid. It is not something embedded in history; it is something that individuals can continue to improve. Although not overt, Kallen contended that the acceptance of a diverse population was the key to progress. Published at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea* ignited a fire within those scholars fighting for a more ethnically and culturally diverse society.

Initially, cultural pluralism took an extremist course. Scholars like J.W. Berry argued for the social fragmentation of the society into cultural subgroups. Berry cited the Canadian example—he felt that multiculturalism had come to define Canada’s national identity. Berry believed that Canada succeeds because its accepted “ethnic groups often provide people with a sense of belonging which can make them better able to cope with the rest of society than they would be as isolated individuals.”⁵⁶ Berry and other multiculturalists of the time promoted the identity choices of each individual over the stable identity of the group or nation.

Assimilationists today use the ideologies of thinkers like Berry to challenge cultural pluralism. One of the main assimilationist critiques of cultural pluralist scholars is that they advocate for a separate, “tribalistic country in which each group will selfishly seek its own ethnocentric norms, mores, and other foreign interests, eventually producing serious social and cultural conflicts, and probably even physical violence.”⁵⁷ However, as the theory developed overtime, pluralists like Michael Novak separated themselves from the more extreme multiculturalists. Cultural pluralism moved away from an “assault [on] the tradition of *unum*,” as Novak put it.⁵⁸ Instead, pluralist scholars came to advocate for the “mutual appreciation” aspect of a multicultural society. I will henceforth focus on the cultural pluralism arguments, distinguishing them from extreme multiculturalist arguments, which have lost influence since the 1970s.

The second edition of prominent Catholic philosopher and diplomat Michael Novak’s *Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in American Life* acknowledges this ideological progression. In his preface, he asserted that, although he wished to maintain the integrity of his original argument, he also sought to distinguish himself from the ideologies of extreme multiculturalists. However, Novak still challenged assimilationists like Arthur Schlesinger. While Novak did “not deny him his own preferences for his own life...” he believed that, “others in similar circumstances might well choose to make a more explicit claim to their own cultural heritage than he does.”⁵⁹ Like Kallen, Novak responded to “the explicit boldness of Nordic racism [that claims that] certain races are more ‘American’ than others.”⁶⁰ Novak also challenged the existence of “*homo Americanus*,” denying the very presence of a single, American culture.⁶¹ By disputing the assumptions at the foundation of the assimilationist argument, Novak placed himself in opposition to assimilationists and in line with cultural pluralists.

Furthermore, Novak positioned immigrants at the forefront of cultural pluralism theory. He argued that the assimilation of immigrants “in a nation as pluralistic as the United States...is shortsighted. The nation’s hopes, purposes, and symbols need to be defined inclusively rather than exclusively; all must become ‘new men’ and ‘new women.’ All the burden ought not to fall upon the newcomers.”⁶² He believed in the necessity of “culture-sharing,” as Gordon did, in order for a diverse society to flourish. He agreed with Gordon that individuals carry and enhance culture. To Novak, “a culture has vitality only if it lives in the skills, disciplines, morals, and manners of the individuals and only if it is carried even in the motions of the individual heart. Individuals, continually re-create, modify and enrich cultures.”⁶³ Following this logic, immigrants should not have to shed their individual cultures in order to assimilate to a static, “American” culture. Immigrants should be encouraged to enrich the American culture to create a more dynamic and meaningful national identity. Novak used the imagery of an “American” symphony: each individual, immigrant and native, has a different part to play in order to create a unified, harmonious song.⁶⁴

Other cultural pluralists followed in the footsteps of Gordon and Novak, adding new aspects along the way. For example, James Morone admitted that while an America culture may exist, “it is a perpetual work in progress.”⁶⁵ Nathan Glazer (a “neoconservative” Democrat) and Daniel Moynihan (a former U.S. Democratic Senator), like Novak, put pluralism in the context of immigration. They asserted in their book *Beyond the Melting Pot* that the assimilationists’ image of the American “melting pot” had failed. They found that the number of new immigrants entering the country limits the ability for these immigrants to assimilate into a pre-existing American culture.⁶⁶ Luis Fraga and Gary Segura agreed. Additionally, they challenged the necessity of assimilation, asserting instead that, “immigrants do not displace American culture,

but they help develop a distinctively new and constantly evolving and expanding U.S. culture.”⁶⁷ Cultural pluralism henceforth became the theory used to advocate for more open immigration policies.

Pluralists agree that America’s culture is not embedded in its historical past. Rather, individuals who live and experience the world help to shape that culture all the time. They see cultural identity as something that is living, something that must continue to change or else it will lose relevance in today’s interconnected world. Finally, they acknowledge the futility in assimilation of large immigrant groups due to the importance of individual identity. People can work together to create a harmonious society, but each person has a different part to play. Samuel Huntington, on the other hand, sees this way of thinking as one of the greatest threats to American national identity.

Samuel Huntington

When a renowned scholar such as Samuel Huntington enters an intellectual debate, one can be assured that he will be taken seriously. A Harvard professor and former foreign policy adviser for President Jimmy Carter, Huntington is celebrated by many as “without a doubt one of the most influential thinkers in politics for the last fifty years.”⁶⁸ Even his critics respect his intellectual weight. They admit that, while he is controversial at times, “an academic of Huntington’s distinction has no need to say something surprising in order to gain attention.”⁶⁹ Although he passed away in 2008, his final book provided fuel for critics even today.

Huntington’s book, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, was and remains so controversial because it positioned the debate between assimilationists and cultural pluralists in a practical setting. Huntington moved away from the hypothetical arguments

and alerted his reader to the immediate danger of Hispanic, and more specifically Mexican, immigration. “Cultural America is under siege,” he warned, “and as the Soviet experience illustrates, ideology is a weak glue to hold together people otherwise lacking racial, ethnic, and cultural sources of community.”⁷⁰ He believed that the American identity is losing its unifying components—no longer is it unified by ethnicity and religion. Huntington cautioned America to reaffirm its *cultural* identity before it dissolved into a loose federation of ethnic groups only connected by a national boundary.⁷¹

Before voicing his opinion on the threat of Mexican immigration, Huntington positioned himself firmly in the assimilationist camp. He reiterated that, “America’s core culture has been and, at the moment, is still primarily the culture of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century settlers who founded American society.” He saw, as Gordon, Schlesinger, and Schmidt did, this culture as one that includes “the Christian religion, Protestant values and moralism, a work ethic, the English language, British traditions of law, justice, and the limits of government power, and a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy, and music.”⁷² Huntington further agreed with Gordon that the success of the American experiment is that the United States was able to assimilate so many immigrants into the Anglo-Protestant culture.⁷³ He too saw America as “the promised land,” and believed that the assimilation of immigrants into the American culture is critical for the survival of the American national identity. He aligned himself with assimilationists like Gordon because he agreed with the assumption of “the centrality and durability of the culture of the founding settlers.”⁷⁴

Huntington also echoed assimilationists’ fears of mounting multiculturalist influence. He characterized “the multiculturalist movement to replace America’s mainstream Anglo-Protestant culture with other cultures” as an attempt “to deconstruct the nation,” and argued that such an

effort is “without precedent in human history.”⁷⁵ He claimed that Horace Kallen’s ideas advocated for “diversity rather than unity or community” as “America’s overriding value.”⁷⁶ Huntington felt that this is a threat to what makes America exceptional. He saw the exaltation of other cultures over a Western culture as essentially anti-American.

While he agreed with assimilationists, Huntington added another component to their arguments. He believed that for an immigrant group to successfully assimilate into American society, it must have three distinct characteristics. First, the original culture of the group has to have a certain degree of compatibility and similarity with America’s national culture.⁷⁷ Second, there should exist some outside forces that select what Huntington saw as “the best” of the group. He characterized this as selectivity. For him, “past difficulties, discomforts, costs, risks, and uncertainties of migrating to the United States” helped to weed out the hardest working and most determined candidates for citizenship.⁷⁸ Finally, Huntington felt that past immigrants successfully assimilated because they were committed in their citizenship to the United States.⁷⁹ To set up his critique of Mexican immigration, Huntington used Mexican immigrants as a negative example to all of these prerequisites for assimilation. Namely, he asserted that their culture is not compatible to the Anglo-Protestant culture of the United States; that they do not have to have the same determination as previous immigrants because of the geographic proximity of Mexico and the United States; and finally that they can enjoy the opportunity and liberty of American while keeping “the culture, language, family ties, traditions, and social networks of their birth country.”⁸⁰

Thus, for Huntington, the main problem with Mexican immigration was the failure of this immigrant group to assimilate. He saw five characteristics of Mexican immigrants that make them so different from past immigrant groups to the United States, and thus unable to assimilate

into the American cultural identity as immigrants have before. The first is the contiguity of Mexican immigration. Unlike immigrants of the past, Mexican immigrants can stay relatively close to their original homeland even if they reside in the United States. This allows for these immigrants to retain the cultures of their birthplaces, and makes them less inclined to accept the Anglo-Protestant cultural norms of the United States.⁸¹ Second, the sheer number of immigrants from Mexico makes it easier for them to form cultural enclaves separate from the American mainstream society.⁸² Third, the illegality of many Mexican immigrants removes the necessity to assimilate—if they cannot legally participate in American society, illegal immigrants tend to stay as far away from that society as they possibly can.⁸³ Forth, the regional concentration of Mexican immigrants in the Southwest creates a large segment of the population with “a single, cultural, linguistic, religious, and national” tradition that differs from the rest of the United States. “...The sobering fact is that the United States has had no experience comparable to what is now taking place in the Southwest.”⁸⁴ The final difference Huntington called attention to is the fact that, “no other immigrant group in American history has asserted or has been able to assert a historical claim to American territory. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans can and do make that claim.”⁸⁵ Thus, Mexican immigrants who move to the Southwest may resist assimilation into American society because they see that territory as a historical extension of Mexico.

Huntington concluded with a controversial endorsement of the Anglo-Protestant tradition in American culture. He believed that the exceptionalism of America comes from its Anglo-Protestant roots and its ability to assimilate immigrants into American culture, preserving the identity of the nation. In opposition to cultural pluralists, he denied that other cultures can “enhance” the American identity. For Huntington, the American way of life exists today only because of the characteristics of the Anglo-Protestant settlers of the United States, not because of

the influence of different cultures throughout America's history. In other words, "there is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English."⁸⁶

Opposition to Huntington

Unsurprisingly, when an intellectual as influential as Samuel Huntington makes such a bold statement about immigration, other scholars inevitably have something to say about it in opposition. These critiques range from a total rejection of Huntington's premises to an acceptance of some ideas but disagreement with others. Scholars Lindsay Perez Huber, Corina Benavides Lopez, Maria Malagon, Veronica Velez and Daniel Solorzano fall into the former category.

In their essay, entitled "Getting beyond the 'symptom,' acknowledging the 'disease': theorizing racist nativism," they asserted that, "Huntington's commentary is emblematic of what [they] see as racist nativist sentiment, rooted in white supremacy and directed at Latinas/os in general and Mexican immigrants in particular."⁸⁷ They viewed Huntington's assertions as the epitome of American nativist ideologies that have plagued immigrants since the country's inception. They argued that "racist nativists" like Huntington assign differences to immigrants of ethnic minorities in order to justify white superiority and dominance over these groups of people. While they gave no solution to the Mexican immigration issue, they simply wished to warn the academic community of the dangers of what they see as outright racism and "white supremacy."⁸⁸

Other critics do not take such an extreme tone. Mainly, scholars challenge Huntington's ideas of Anglo-Protestant superiority over other culture groups. For example, Luis Fraga and

Gary Segura proposed that “the most important element of American identity [is] its capacity to be built through the successful synthesis of people with nationally diverse origins into a new American identity.”⁸⁹ They argued that the ability to adapt has been the most crucial to the durability of American cultural identity, not the preservation of its Anglo-Protestant roots.⁹⁰ On a similar note, Amitai Etzioni suggested that to assume the superiority of the Anglo-Protestant tradition over others is to miss out on what those other cultures have to offer. For him, Mexican immigrant culture could help to fill the gaps he found in the America way of life. He entertained the idea that, “given that more and more of our values and social relations are undermined by longer working hours, our 24/7 society would benefit from immigrants who value family, community, and social life more than do Anglo-Protestants. Thus, Mexican immigrants may save America from becoming too Protestant.”⁹¹

Huntington’s piece and its critics help to position the assimilationist and cultural pluralist debate into practical terms regarding Mexican immigrants. Huntington took assimilationist arguments and used them to raise alarms of the non-assimilation of Mexican immigrants. He supported assimilationists’ claims of Anglo-Protestant dominance in American culture. Huntington urged the country to maintain those roots by doing more to stem the flow of immigration of an ethnic group that he sees as unable to assimilate. Many of his critics articulated the side of the cultural pluralists. They challenged the superiority of Anglo-Protestant traditions, some even characterizing the assumption as inherently racist. Further, they showed the possible contributions of Mexican immigrants to American society. For the cultural pluralists, America’s success lies in its ability to be shaped by many cultures, not by imposing a way of life on others.

But who is right? Does the survival of America depend either on the preservation of its Anglo-Protestant foundations and its ability to assimilate newcomers into that mold? Or is survival contingent on whether America can allow all cultures to reside within its borders in peace, without any attempts at acculturation? Is the argument as black and white as Huntington and his critics propose it to be? Many academics, like Huntington, tend to address the immigration debate in either assimilation or cultural pluralist terms. They build on scholars of the past, the Gordons and the Kallens, in order to make sweeping statements about either the threat or the promise of Mexican immigrants. However, as the country has seen in the last fifty years, the issue of how to react to the serious inflow of a new ethnic group is an extremely complex one. Although both assimilationists and cultural pluralists offer interesting insights, the fault of scholars like Huntington lies in the oversimplification of the issue. In reality, Huntington was right in one respect: the situation of Mexican immigrants is indeed unprecedented in American history. However, this is not because they refuse to assimilate or because they are unable to. Furthermore, the solution is not as clear-cut as cultural pluralists advance either. The reason that the Mexican immigration issue is so much more complex than other immigration issues of America's past is the existence of a 2,000-mile shared border. A shared territorial border has created immense intricacies with regards to Mexican immigration to the United States. However, the evolving culture of the region surrounding the border provides an insight for the future of America's overall national identity.

Chapter IV: The Border

Complexities and Insights

Border issues have characterized US-Mexican relations since the inception of both nations. The history of the border can be broken up into three distinct periods: the period of alienation (1560s-1880s), coexistence (1880s-1920s), and finally, interdependence (1920s-present).⁹²

As Europeans contested for North American territory, they continuously redefined the boundaries between the American and Mexican colonies. Thus, an impermanent border and a constant reclassification of which territory belonged to which empire characterized the alienation period. However, as the American and later the Mexican people slowly gained their own independence, border disputes became a matter of national importance. Settlers, especially American settlers, vied for control of territories that they saw as rightfully theirs. At the height of this period, American immigration into Texas forced the independence and eventual annexation of the region to the United States in the 1840s.⁹³ Later, with the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, Mexico additionally ceded the New Mexico and Arizona territories.⁹⁴ Thus, the areas encompassing modern-day Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California became part of the U.S. border region.⁹⁵

The next era of US-Mexico border relations witnessed a period of uneasy peace. Economic opportunities nurtured symbiotic relationships between border towns like El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. To fuel America's industrial revolution, the northeastern United States imported raw materials from Mexican territories in close proximity to the border.⁹⁶ The Mexican Revolution of 1910 threatened these cross-border relationships. Violence and smuggling plagued border relations. However, "in cities like El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, the extant cross-border

bonds endured despite repeated setbacks, assuring the trend toward greater binational interchange would continue.”⁹⁷ This began the tradition of Mexican immigration to the United States to fill the demands for cheap labor.

Economic incentives motivated agricultural employers to lobby for the exemption of Mexican immigrants from the 1924 immigration quotas. Thus, Mexican migrant workers continued to cross the border, mostly in seasonal patterns, through the 1930s and 1940s.⁹⁸ Additionally, the Bracero Program of 1942 “recognized the value of Mexican labor to the US economic system and provided a legal means by which Mexican labor could be imported for brief periods of time.”⁹⁹ As Mexican workers filled the gaps in labor left by mobilization of American troops for World War II, the Bracero Program provided health benefits and transportation, and guaranteed a minimum wage.¹⁰⁰ Mexican immigrants, American agricultural employers, and both governments benefitted from this program and it was deemed generally successful. “The Bracero Program had issued 4.6 million visas by 1964, and so helped spark the transformation” of a new era of immigration “by fostering a new generation of migration-oriented Mexican workers, US employers, and transnational labor recruiters.”¹⁰¹ However, as American troops returned from World War II and as agriculture became increasingly mechanized, the demand for foreign labor from Mexico decreased dramatically in the 1950s.¹⁰²

In response, in June of 1954, the President Eisenhower teamed up with INS Commissioner Joseph Swing to launch the highly publicized Operation Wetback in an attempt to deport a large number of illegal immigrants at one time.¹⁰³ The apprehension of over one million illegal immigrants in 1954 alone demonstrates the campaign’s success.¹⁰⁴ However, the migration pulls to the United States were simply too strong in the 1960s and 1970s for Mexican immigration to remain abated for long. Employment opportunities due to the demand for cheap

labor drew Mexican migrant workers to the United States. Additionally, “high fertility rates in Mexico combined with an agricultural privatization program produced high levels of agricultural dislocation, rural-urban migration, and new job seekers in Mexico.”¹⁰⁵ Naturally, many of these job seekers looked to the prosperous North for new opportunities.

Faced with this new influx of migrant workers, the United States sought to stem the flow of Mexican immigration by using the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), or the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 to impose the first limits to the number of immigrants in the Western Hemisphere. The Act, as mentioned earlier, gave preference to immigrant families and skilled immigrants and abolished immigration quotas. However, it also created numerical limits for lawful permanent resident (LPR) visas, also known as “green-cards,” and specifically “prohibited unskilled seasonal/temporary workers from receiving employment-based LPR visas”¹⁰⁶ (as opposed to family-based LPR visas). These limits and prohibitions naturally affected Mexican immigrants more than any other immigrant group. As a result, although Congress had intended to reduce immigration from Mexico, it only succeeded in decreasing the amount of *legal* Mexican immigration to the United States. Underestimating the relative ease of crossing a land border as opposed to a vast ocean faced by other immigrants, America resorted to past methods of legal barriers of entry to restrict Mexican immigration into the United States. However, the promise of a more prosperous life in America, and with only “a line in the ground and a shallow river”¹⁰⁷ to cross, Mexican immigration continued unabated. With the Hart-Cellar legal restrictions, US Congress unintentionally created a massive new flow of *illegal* immigration from Mexico—by 1976, out of the 1.7 million illegal “aliens” residing in the United States, 1.4 million were of Mexican origin.¹⁰⁸

Over the next twenty years, Congress sought to correct the illegality problem it unintentionally intensified in 1965. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in an attempt to eliminate what it saw as the contributing factors to illegal immigration. The act tried to address both sides of the situation: it created employer sanctions, mainly fines, for those who hired illegal workers and allowed about three million illegal aliens to apply for citizenship.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, immigration reforms since then have expanded the grounds for deportation, increased border security, and limited the access of immigrants to societal benefits such as Medicare and Social Security.¹¹⁰ In attempts to enforce these immigration regulations, “programs such as Operation Hold-the-Line in El Paso (1993), Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego (1994), Operation Safeguard in central Arizona (1995) and Operation Rio Grande in south Texas (1997) were designed to fortify traditional crossing areas in an effort to prevent illegal entry through these popular zones.”¹¹¹

However, due to the proximity of the United States to Mexico and increasing economic opportunities in the north for immigrants, Mexican immigration, both legal and illegal has continued at an unprecedented pace. According to a US Congressional Report, the Mexican-born population in the United States has increased from 2.8 million to 11.8 million past thirty years.¹¹² Thus, almost 9 million new Mexican immigrants have moved to the United States since the 1980s. Of those 11.8 million Mexican-born living in the US, only 2.7 are naturalized citizens.¹¹³ In 2010 the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that 6.5 million, or 55 percent, of Mexican-born people in the United States were unauthorized or illegal “aliens.”¹¹⁴ Furthermore, of the top ten counties in which Mexicans reside, nine are located in border-states, mainly in Texas and California. Los Angeles County alone hosts 3.5 million Mexican-born residents.¹¹⁵

Taken together, these statistics indicate that a massive number of Mexican legal and illegal immigrants have crossed the shared US-Mexican border since the 1960s. As much as the United States government has sought to stem the flow of immigration from Mexico, it has been for the most part unsuccessful due to the border shared by Mexico and America. Furthermore, most of these immigrants settled in what scholars classify as the “border region.” This group is single-handedly changing the demographic make-up of these border communities. Inevitably, this uniquely high concentration of non-white, Mexican immigrants in the Southwest borderlands has had a great impact on the overall perspectives and cultures of these communities. As immigrant and native groups connect and interact with each other, the culture of the region is beginning to change.

As scholar Óscar Martínez articulates, “the high level of transboundary interchange makes” the US-Mexico border region “quite distinct. Nowhere else do so many millions of people from two so dissimilar nations live in such close proximity and interact with each other so intensely.”¹¹⁶ Thus, the “borderland culture” is a product of the “transculturation shared by Mexicans and Americans.”¹¹⁷ Martínez states that, as a result of these constant cultural interactions, the border region has generated a different identity than the rest of the country. It is an identity that Huntington failed to acknowledge in his writings. While still a part of the greater United States, border-states and -cities have come to redefine what it means to be an American in the Southwest. According to Martínez, “El Pasoans, Juarenses, San Diegans, Tijuans, and residents of other frontier cities have fashioned a complex system of social organization that transcends the conventional dividing lines of nationality, race, ethnicity, and class.”¹¹⁸

More than any other group, Mexican Americans represent the product of this exchange. As Martínez asserts, “vast numbers of Mexican Americans maintain substantial bonds with

Mexico, and they live bicultural and transnational lifestyles to a far greater degree than any other sector of the borderlands population.”¹¹⁹ In other words, Mexican immigrants serve as cultural middlemen—traveling back-and-forth across the border and are constantly forced to reconcile the cultures of both their homelands and the lands in which they reside. Therefore, Mexican Americans make a great contribution to the dynamic culture of borderlands. With such a high concentration of these people in the region today, they have great influence over “the structuring of borderlands society.”¹²⁰

Anthropologist Michael Kearney agrees that the identity of the borderlands is undergoing a significant change. However, he takes the argument one step further. He claims that the massive migration of Mexican peoples into the United States has changed the very nature of the traditional balances of power over the region’s identity itself. Kearney explains that before the 1960s, border identities were characterized by what he refers to as “the modern age” nation-state relationships. “Such boundaries marked firm, absolute distinctions between national ‘we’ and distant ‘they,’ and by the same token, between anthropological Self and ethnographic Other...”¹²¹ However, the massive migration of mostly illegal immigrants are now challenging those absolute distinctions. For Kearney, these “undocumented persons successfully defy the state’s power to control their movement into and through this space and in doing so contest not only space but also control their identity.”¹²² Today, Mexican-Americans, especially illegal ones, live outside the traditional boundaries of nation-states. They successfully redefine the identity of the region in “transnational” terms.¹²³

Unlike Martínez, Kearney then goes into detail regarding how cultures are exported and re-created in border regions. To do this, he paints the picture of a migrant worker from Oaxaca, Mexico coming to the United States in search of employment. The “individualized migrant is

allowed into the US nation-state not as a citizen, but as an ‘alien’, not as someone to be incorporated into the social body, but as someone to be devoured by it.”¹²⁴ The migrant recognizes this and strives to protect his human value. He looks to his home community—its “markers of collective identity,” that have developed over time due to the very presence of its already migrated citizens.¹²⁵ He thus carries with him those markers of identity as he settles into the communities of the United States borderlands. As a result, the migrant has successfully exported aspects of Mexican culture to the United States. He adopts aspects of American culture and his home culture to create a new, transnational identity. Although Kearney’s choice of the word “devoured” does not paint this process of transculturation in a very positive light, he simply acknowledges that the process exists because of the circumstances of the region.

The end of Kearney’s essay shifts the discussions of Martínez’s and Kearney’s characterization of cross-border interactions and transnational identities toward a more nationally relevant conclusion. Kearney states:

This changing configuration of the border challenges the ability of the two nation-states involved to define the legal and cultural identities of their border populations, which transcend the official spatial and legal bounds. Whereas the past history of immigration into the United States has been one of assimilation, the ethnography of the Border Area suggests that its future history will be one of indigestibility, as the unity of national totemism gives way to the multiplicity of transnational ethnicity.¹²⁶

This statement asserts that assimilation of America’s past is impossible in the Mexican immigrant case. Due to a shared land border, Mexican immigrants have been able to circumvent legal pathways to US entry. In defying traditional power structures and the boundaries of nation-states, they have succeeded in creating a transnational region along the border. As more and more immigrants settle, their cultures and traditions contact with the cultures and traditions of native “Anglos.” A hybrid culture forms as especially Mexican Americans struggle to maintain

their personal values while simultaneously succeeding in an American society. Mexican Americans are not assimilating—they are creating a new definition of what it means to be American. A shared border between the United States and Mexico facilitates this hybridization of culture.

The famed Argentinian ethnographer Pablo Vila adds to both Martínez and Kearney's arguments by initially pointing out the weakness in each of them. In his study of the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border region, Vila moves away from generalizations about the "hybrid culture" of the border region in order to demonstrate its complex nature. Instead of describing a homogenous, static culture forming in border towns, he speaks to the ever-changing identities of Juarenses and El Pasoans. Vila cautions that, while the culture of the border region appears hybridized, the identities of the people that live in the region stand distinct from each other, not just distinct from the rest of the country. The problem that Vila has with many border scholars is that "they tend to homogenize the border, as if there were only one border identity, border culture, or process of hybridization."¹²⁷ In other words, the reality of the U.S.-Mexico border is much more complicated than border theorists make it out to be.

According to Vila, the complexities of the border identity lie in the tensions caused by the constant encounters of different cultures. While these daily interactions can fuel innovation and creativity, Vila also considers how this cultural collision leads to more rigid definitions of individual identities. For him,

...the border is not really one, but multiple, in the sense that not only different people construct distinct borders and disparate identities around those borders, but those different border acquire a distinct weight in relation to the different subject positions (and the different narratives within those subject positions) people decide to identify with.¹²⁸

Vila argues that to homogenize the border culture is to overlook the complex identities people adopt while living near the border. To assume that people all share a common border identity is to misunderstand the reality of the situation.

In order to find the reconciliation between Martínez, Kearney, and Vila's arguments, one must revisit Kearney's anecdote about the Mexican immigrant from Oaxaca. The immigrant's story is not one of positive integration or acceptance into the American society. Nor is it even a story of success. His story is one of struggle and survival. He adopts aspects of American culture out of necessity, and similarly, he keeps any aspects of his old culture that he can because it makes his life a little easier. Vila puts this in more practical terms: "aspects of Mexican culture are thus, on the one hand, increasingly penetrating the U.S.-Mexico border, creating a variety of 'hybrid' products such as Tex-Mex cuisine and Conjunto Music. But meanwhile, the border has recently experienced dramatic processes of reinforcement to keep the 'real other' on the Southern side of the line."¹²⁹ Struggle and tensions lead residents to distinguish themselves from others, but their distinctions are what make up border communities. The non-homogeneous aspect of the border identity, and the requirement of residents to accept cultural differences in order to participate effectively in their society, is the very thing that makes the regional identity distinct from the national identity. The forced tolerance of difference given the inevitable presence of multiple cultures creates a society unlike that of the greater American society.

Chapter V: Case Study

Language Acquisition in El Paso, Texas

In order to better understand how the circumstances of the border region force the toleration of differences among its residents, one must analyze the environment of one specific

place. While the situation of El Paso, Texas is not the same exact situation of every other city along the US-Mexican border, it can help to highlight how the presence of Mexican immigrants in an American city can have a significant impact on the culture of that city. I chose El Paso because it sits at the crossroads of a heavily utilized border checkpoint through which thousands of people cross every day. As a result, out of the 800,647 people living in El Paso and the surrounding area, 76.6 percent are Mexican Americans.¹³⁰ In other words, the majority of the people living in El Paso, an American city, are ethnically Mexican. Thus, the residents of El Paso have re-defined the demographics of the region, and as a result, have helped shape the conditions under which a distinct culture is forming.

One of the best ways to understand this culture is through the use of language in El Paso. Nationally, English is the most commonly expected language. However, in a place like El Paso, where Spanish speakers make up the majority of the population, English does not always satisfy the needs of residents. In El Paso, 72 percent of the population speaks Spanish at home.¹³¹ Furthermore, 30 percent of the population speaks English “less than ‘very well.’”¹³² Simply because of demographic shift that Mexican immigrants created, Spanish has now become a necessary means of participating in the general society. For example, one of the El Paso Independent School District’s 5-year strategic goals is to: “...produce multilingual, multi-literate, multicultural student citizens using dual language pathways to optimize academic achievement ready for 21st Century leadership.”¹³³ Even though many consider this as a positive goal for any school district, in the El Paso Independent School district it is an absolute necessity given that 30 percent of its students are learning English as a second language.¹³⁴ Another example of the presence of bilingualism can be found in the circulation numbers of the Spanish newspaper, *El Diario de El Paso*, which distributes an average of 20,466 copies daily.¹³⁵

Ethnographer Richard Teschner further punctuates the presence of bilingualism through his characterization of El Paso's work environments. According to Teschner, "...most El Paso retail stores...tend to hire persons who can communicate with their Spanish-speaking monolingual clientele."¹³⁶ Additionally, factory supervisors maintain a fluency in Spanish (many are native speakers) in order to communicate with their Mexican workers, and most health practitioner's offices have at least one native Spanish speaker on staff at all times.¹³⁷ Every doctor that Teschner claims to have encountered in El Paso possessed the knowledge of at least twenty "health-related Spanish phrases."¹³⁸ Clearly, the Spanish language finds its way into the daily lives of almost all of the residents of El Paso. The omnipresence of Spanish proves to be merely a consequence of the mass amounts of Spanish-speaking Latino and especially Mexican Americans who live in the city. Businesses and schools make bilingualism a priority out of necessity—there are enough people in El Paso who do not speak English to warrant such a prioritization. These cultural circumstances create the emergence of bilingualism as a means of opportunity and as a reality of daily life.

Isabel Velázquez's study of "intergenerational Spanish transmission in El Paso, Texas" highlights the existence of bilingualism as both a tension and a community reality.¹³⁹ Through her survey of five El Pasoan women, Velázquez attempts to explain the transmission of Spanish by Hispanic mothers to their children. Although each of the mothers share a similar socioeconomic background, their views differed in terms of how they felt about bilingualism. In line with Vila's arguments, Velázquez found that the mothers' choices to encourage bilingualism with their children or not were "motivated by beliefs about language that stem from underlying tensions present in a multilingual community."¹⁴⁰ Some interviewees, such as Lala Macedo and Carmen Mena, felt that "bilingual education of all types hindered the full acquisition of English

in children and thus, made them susceptible to future discrimination.”¹⁴¹ As Vila alluded to in his article, people within the community have complex views about culture sharing. Fears of discrimination and prejudice color residents’ outlooks on the positive aspects of cultural diversity.

However, Velázquez’s study provides a window into the daily realities of El Paso life. According to her findings, “all speakers attributed a very high vitality to Spanish in their community, estimating that three quarters or more of El Paso’s population spoke Spanish.”¹⁴² In this way, although the speakers disagreed on the advantage of bilingualism, all admitted its unquestionable presence in the community. Furthermore, all but one of the mothers strongly agreed that Mexican American parents should teach their children Spanish and encourage them to maintain Spanish fluency throughout their lives. Velázquez punctuated that, “...while all parents agreed English was crucial for their children’s academic success, ...all agreed with the notion that speaking Spanish in El Paso was advantageous.”¹⁴³

The results of the study indicate that parents in El Paso understand the advantages of bilingualism in their communities and want their children to have that advantage. As a result, both Spanish and English become embedded in the identities of the children of El Paso. Although the children come from a different family with its own distinct identity (as Vila stresses), they all share a common exposure to the culture of both the Spanish and English languages. Thus, El Paso, and other similar border towns, breed a hybrid culture, a transnational culture that is neither distinctly American nor Mexican. Although the residents in these places disagree on many aspects of identity and culture, the one thing that they can agree on is the existence of aspects of both Mexican and American culture in their daily lives.

Chapter VI: The New Assimilation

Cultural Inertia

With the existence of a hybrid culture in mind, I will now examine the implications of these findings in terms of assimilation. According to Kearney's argument, the transnational culture in the border region makes traditional assimilation impossible. However, as we see in El Paso, a multiculturalist solution would fail because people in a community need to have a common ground on which to interact. In the El Paso case, residents are adapting their language and cultures in order to connect with a significant part of the community that they would have otherwise not been able to. Thus, the hybrid culture of the border indicates that a new understanding of both assimilation and pluralism is needed.

Scholars Michael Zárate and Moira Shaw introduced their theory of cultural inertia in order to understand how traditional assimilation cannot be applied in the case of Mexican immigration to the United States. As they define it, cultural inertia is: "the desire to avoid cultural change, or conversely, to continue change once change is already occurring."¹⁴⁴ Cultural inertia theory dictates that, because of the cultural phenomenon of hybridization in the border regions, natives in border regions will feel like they have more in common with Mexican immigrants because natives encounter Mexican culture on a daily basis. According to Zárate and Shaw, they will thus be more accepting of this group and be more inclined to emphasize "common identities versus distinct identities."¹⁴⁵

Zárate and Shaw's theory provides interesting insights in the assimilation versus cultural pluralism debate. They show that, "cultural inertia produces a different preference for an assimilated society or a multicultural society as a function of how one currently matches the dominant culture."¹⁴⁶ If a group enjoys majority status within a population, it will advocate for

assimilation because members will not have to change. Conversely, a minority group wishes for a multicultural society so it will not have to change. Minorities oppose assimilation as it erodes their culture and therefore their self-identification. However, in border cities like El Paso, Mexican immigrants challenge assimilation because they are not the minority. In these places, the ethnic groups of American natives and Mexican immigrants are relatively balanced. Furthermore, their constant interaction both yields a new hybrid culture and simultaneously creates a phenomenon of forced acceptance. While this seems like an endorsement of unchecked cultural pluralism, Zárate and Shaw strongly emphasize the *commonality* aspect of this cultural coexistence. They assured us that, while cultural inertia indeed “recommends the... maintenance of cultural subgroup identities,” it simultaneously requires the “creation of overarching superordinate identities.”¹⁴⁷ These superordinate identities exist because of the common exposure to different cultures on a day-to-day basis. As the United States becomes more diverse, Zárate and Shaw pose an interesting reconciliation of assimilation and cultural pluralism using a border community as a positive example of cultural acceptance.

Zárate and Shaw’s study provides a window into the arguments of a growing group of scholars dissatisfied with the traditional arguments of assimilationists and cultural pluralists. In light of the transnational culture developing in the US-Mexican border region, scholars recently have been challenging traditional wisdom in order to better address the complexities of Mexican immigration.

Pluralistic Assimilation

Like Zárate and Shaw, much of the “new” assimilationist literature acknowledges the shortcomings of both cultural pluralism and traditional assimilation. As scholar Peter Skerry

points out, assimilationist “fears of a Quebec in the Southwest are not only wrong-headed, they can also be tinged with a cranky nativism.” However, Skerry admits that these fears “do express, however ineptly or offensively, justifiable concerns that Mexicans will somehow fail to keep the social contract that has long obtained between American society and its constituent groups.”¹⁴⁸ Instead he advocates for a more developed understanding of assimilation. He challenges the prevailing idea that assimilation is a simple acculturation into a society dominated by one tradition.

Skerry initially points to the changing nature of America itself. Although he acknowledges the inevitable presence of Anglo-Protestant tradition in American culture, he believes that this tradition is itself developing. Historically, America’s “premodern ‘Tudor polity,’ as Huntington calls it, has provided numerous bridges across which immigrants were able to move from their traditional subcultures into the American mainstream.”¹⁴⁹ However, American institutions no longer represent the ideologies of its settlers. According to Skerry, what Huntington failed to recognize is that American culture has already evolved past its Anglo-Saxon roots. Skerry goes even further to add that Mexican immigrants have more trouble assimilating than past immigrant groups because institutions in the United States have far less in common with the traditional cultures of Mexico and others than they did in the past.¹⁵⁰ In this light, he advocates for a non-linear idea of assimilation. Skerry asserts that instead of an all encompassing endorsement of Mexican assimilation, only “the *political* assimilation of Mexican Americans is critical, because it is in that realm where the predictable discontents and frustrations accompanying social, economic, and cultural assimilation are being transformed into the divisive demands” of traditional assimilationists.”¹⁵¹

Roger Brubaker agrees. Like Skerry, he stresses that, “assimilation is not a single process of the sort envisaged by ‘straight-line’ accounts.”¹⁵² While “some forms of assimilation are indeed desirable,” Brubaker sees no benefits in the black-and-white arguments of traditional assimilationists. Facing a more dynamic understanding of assimilation, a society can better grapple with the complexities that come with the presence of a large immigrant population like Mexican Americans. In the same way that Zárate and Shaw showed how native populations in border regions will accept immigrant groups by focusing on similarities, Skerry argues that a more complex idea of assimilation can create more acceptance of Mexican immigrants. His form of dynamic assimilation “enables us to ask questions about the domains and degrees of emergent similarities, *and* persisting differences, between multi-generational populations of immigrant origin and particular reference populations.”¹⁵³ In other words, Americans should understand that assimilation is a process in which a culturally complex group merges with another complex group. As with cultural inertia, these cultural groups should embrace similarities in order to identify common grounds on which to build a unified, national culture.

Bill Hing attempts to identify these common grounds. Unlike the previous scholars, Hing focused on a new definition of cultural pluralism as opposed to focusing on assimilation. He encourages Americans to “consider a new approach to cultural pluralism, which respects diverse views and cultures, which is constantly attentive to race relations, and which shares a common core set of values.”¹⁵⁴ Like traditional cultural pluralists, Hing speaks to the inevitable influence that immigrants have on the general American culture. Their cuisine, language, religious traditions, and values are to some extent adopted into the American mainstream. Unlike the image conjured by assimilationists, “immigrants do not displace American culture, but they develop a distinctively new and constantly evolving and expanding US culture.”¹⁵⁵

However, Hing departs from traditional cultural pluralist ideology in his acknowledgement of assimilationists' fears with regards to "intergroup conflict and separatism."¹⁵⁶ Hing identifies two kinds of separatism: ideological and sociological. Ideological separatism can "stem from anger over or disappointment in a system perceived to be weighted against certain class or groups."¹⁵⁷ He finds that sociological separatism is more common among immigrant groups. This second type characterizes immigrants "who seek separate ethnic and racial communities out of comfort," a choice Hing sees as being motivated by the "simple matter of familiarity with language, culture, and behavior."¹⁵⁸ Hings believes both attitudes of separatism to be problematic as often they lead to intergroup conflict. These concerns mirror those of assimilationists. However, Hing does not think that traditional assimilation into a dominant Anglo-Protestant national culture is the answer.

Like Brubaker and Skerry, Hing sees assimilation as "a fluid and evolving process rather than a static one."¹⁵⁹ Just as Huntington ignored the existence of a transnational identity in the United States' border region, Hing believes that cultural pluralists and assimilationists ignore the "realities of the nation."¹⁶⁰ With the recognition of the symbiotic cultural exchange between Mexican Americans and natives, Hing calls for a new definition of what it means to be an American. While this new American society should celebrate diversity and cultural exchange, it should also encourage the acceptance of a common set of core values that would unite an American nation. Hing characterizes them as human values: "to repudiate racism, heterosexism, and class distinctions in our daily activities; to be open, caring and fair; and to be accepting of diversity and respectful of others."¹⁶¹ Hing's argument would have leaders "at the highest levels of government and society" uphold these values, leading by example.

In their attempts to reconcile cultural pluralist and assimilationist arguments, the aforementioned scholars point to the weakness in each argument. Traditional assimilationist claims dramatize the reality of cultural exchange and advocate for a much too rigid definition of cultural assimilation. Assimilation is a dynamic process that involves cultural exchange on either side. It must be looked at over multiple generations and across multiple aspects of society. Furthermore, the claims of Anglo-Protestant superiority are outdated. American culture, affected by its own diversity in an increasingly interdependent world, has consequently adapted and grown. Thus, calls for a reinforcement of Anglo-Protestant roots would merely be a step backwards in the cultural maturation of the nation.

These scholars also address the flaws in the ideas of cultural pluralists. With only political ideologies and a common legal system to unify the country, separatism could lead to degenerative intergroup conflict. As ethnic communities create more separate cultural enclaves, many may begin to emphasize differences over similarities. As cultural inertia theory shows, less cultural exchange will cause more anxieties over the adaptation of one group to another. If differences are emphasized, cultures will remain separated and any sort of relations with another group will be strained. Thus, scholars like Hing advocate for a shared core set of national values. These values would stress the importance of diversity, but they would also encourage fairness and the respect of others. In redefining what it means to be American, we can ensure the durability of the American spirit.

The El Paso case provides an interesting scenario in which this new definition of pluralistic assimilation thrives. The demographic conditions of the city, namely the large Mexican American presence as a consequence of massive Mexican immigration, necessitates the need for El Pasoans to accept, even adopt, aspects of both Mexican and American culture. The

sheer volume of Mexicans immigrating to El Paso created circumstances for them to retain aspects of their culture. The number of people living in El Paso who speak Spanish at home highlights just one of the ways Mexican immigrants have been able to preserve their cultural traditions. However, in order to be successful, Mexican Americans are forced to adopt aspects of American culture, such as proficiency in English. As evident by the concurrence between the Hispanic mothers in Velázquez's study, many Mexican Americans understand that their children must be able to speak English if they are to be successful in the United States. Both languages provide opportunities.

It therefore becomes clear that forced assimilation into an Anglo-Protestant model would be detrimental to the livelihood of the citizens in places like El Paso. While some aspects of American culture are useful to Mexican immigrants, such as the English language, the number of Mexican Americans living in the United States today creates certain communities in which some aspects of Mexican culture are also valued. Instead of forcing Mexican Americans to acculturate into the American cultural mainstream before they become citizens, they should be given legal rights first. In this way, Mexican Americans have an incentive to adopt the aspects of American culture that they see as useful in order to successfully participate in American society. Simultaneously however, Mexican Americans can decide for themselves what aspects of their culture would be advantageous for them to keep. I agree with Peter Skerry—the American political arena provides the common ground that shapes the American identity. Thus, providing a less conditional pathway to citizenship, one that is cheaper and more streamlined, would help integrate the staggering population of Mexican immigrants into American society much more effectively than forced acculturation would. As in El Paso, a middle ground is needed in order to bridge the gap between Americans and Mexican immigrants. Creating a way for more Mexican

Americans to enter the American political arena would provide them with the best bridge possible in order to participate in American society. As a result, politics would have to adapt much like the people of El Paso have. In an increasingly multicultural world, this may not necessarily be a bad thing.

“Intolerance betrays want of faith in one’s cause.”

-Mahatma Gandhi, 1921¹⁶²

Chapter VII: Conclusion

American nativists have influenced the United States’ immigration policies and attitudes since the country’s inception. They champion the exceptionalism of American identity—they uphold the Anglo-Protestant traditions of the nation’s founding fathers and advocate for the protection of those traditions from the influence of others. Cultural pluralists take the other side. They feel that all cultures should be celebrated and that the fault of the American mainstream culture is its Euro-centric inclinations. To them, all cultural groups should be allowed to coexist within the boundaries of the United States. Cultural pluralists believe that the real American exceptionalism lies in its acceptance of others regardless of class or origin.

The presence of Mexican Americans in the United States makes this argument more complex than theorists like Samuel Huntington would lead us to believe. The ability of Mexican immigrants to cross the land border between Mexico and the United States in large numbers, coupled with their capacity to cross back-and-forth between these two countries after they have settled in the United States has created a unique cultural phenomenon. These immigrants are developing transnational identities that include cultural aspects of both Mexico and America. As

Mexican Americans become increasingly present in American border-cities and states, these transnational identities are beginning to characterize the identity of the communities themselves. Thus, traditional assimilation of Mexican Americans proves futile, considering the fact that they have already heavily impacted the culture and perspectives of the southwestern United States. With the persistence of Mexican immigration, transnational identities will develop in other US cities and towns that are not even close to the border. Many argue that this is already happening. One only needs to walk through the rural community of Yakima, Washington to witness the Mexican cultural influence of the migrant agricultural workers that have settled there.

The implications for the United States are not as dire as assimilationists make them out to be. Cultural sharing has been and will continue to be a part of American life for many years to come. The fault lies in the assumption of the simplistic nature of assimilation. But in reality, this process does not involve the complete adoption of Anglo-Protestant values in order to become a functioning American citizen. Assimilation, while necessary to national unity, should be considered in degrees and over many generations of immigrants. Although my great-grandfather was an Italian immigrant, I do not speak Italian at all. Do I still like Italian food? Of course. Do I appreciate the family-oriented values passed down to me by his children's children? Absolutely. Thus, as many of us are descendants of immigrants, we see that the process of assimilation is one characterized by give-and-take cultural interactions with fellow Americans and outsiders. Our common set of values and a common political identity facilitates these interactions. We are *free* to interact with one another, free to share values and ideas and to challenge each other. That is American exceptionalism.

The importance of national unity lies not in the presence of one dominating culture, but instead in the existence of a common place where Americans from different cultural

backgrounds can come together to share ideas. In our society, that place is our political arena. The participatory nature of our government allows all citizens to influence the decisions made by our political leaders. Although it may sound idealistic, democracies are established so that the people can have some avenue in which to interact with the society in which they live. Therefore, the process for Mexican immigrants to become participating members in our political system should be made easier. Instead of making citizenship contingent on acculturation, U.S. immigration policy should prioritize citizenship and adopt a more pluralistic assimilationist approach.

Implications for the Current Immigration Debate

This analysis can be directly applied to the current immigration debate. It seems as though American political leaders are now realizing the importance of the naturalization of the millions of illegal immigrants in our country. Restrictionist groups are beginning to lose ground in their fight for policies to encourage “self-deportation,” or those policies that “make it so difficult for illegal immigrants to live in this country—by denying them work, driver’s licenses and any public benefits and by stepping up enforcement—that they will give up and go home.”¹⁶³ Politicians are starting to agree on the benefits of immigration reform in order to create more effective paths to citizenship for current illegal immigrants. Reform proposals emphasize the need for a better access to visas for foreign entrepreneurs and “foreign students graduating in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields in U.S. universities.”¹⁶⁴ The reform proposals also promise to provide legal status to many of the millions of illegal immigrants in this country. Coupled with employment verification program (E-verify) requirements and

increased border patrol, the reforms seek to amend the current illegality issues among the immigrant population today while simultaneously discouraging further illegal immigration.¹⁶⁵

In political speeches and meetings, these reforms seem comprehensive and groundbreaking. The efforts of the “Gang of Eight,” a bipartisan group of eight Senators that came together to create an immigration reform proposal, have been championed as a marvelous and historic achievement.¹⁶⁶ However, a deeper analysis of the details of the “gang’s” proposal sheds light on the fact that they seem to be missing the point. The intermediate status of “legal permanent resident” does protect immigrants from being deported and allows them to work legally in the United State while paying taxes. But only true citizenship awards the right to vote.¹⁶⁷ Currently, legal permanent residents have to have lived in the country for five uninterrupted years and pay \$680 in filing fees before they can become citizens.¹⁶⁸ Some postulate that under the Gang of Eight’s immigration plan, “the newly amnestied aliens would obtain a green card after 10 years and pay back taxes, a ‘hefty’ penalty, gain English proficiency, and make an admission that they broke the law. Then, the amnestied alien could gain citizenship in another 10 years,” according the Federation for American Immigration Reform.¹⁶⁹ Until the gang releases their proposal to the Senate this month, many of the details remain simply conjecture. But if these rumors are even remotely true, increasing the duration of legal permanent status will merely exacerbate the immigrant problem in the United States. *Citizenship* should be streamlined for everyone—merely handing out more visas will prevent legal American residents from participating the national government and will thus hinder their integration into American national society. With no incentive to adopt aspects of the American culture, many immigrants, and especially Mexican immigrants, will continue to live separated from the general public.

It is time for real immigration reform. As the Mexican American population spreads from the border region to the rest of the country, the United States should stop stifling the political voice of these people. As President Obama stated earlier this year:

We are the first nation to be founded for the sake of an idea—the idea that each of us deserves the chance to shape our own destiny. That’s why centuries of pioneers and immigrants have risked everything to come here...The future is ours to win. But to get there, we cannot stand still.¹⁷⁰

We can no longer stand still. We have to accept changes in our society and adjust to them. Only through adaptation can the true essence of the American national identity survive.

Research Limitations

As with all cultural research, much analysis is lost without experiencing or viewing the actual culture that one is studying. The main piece that this thesis lacks is the presence of any data that I would have compiled if I had spent some time in the city of El Paso, Texas. For the purposes of this paper, I had no way or not nearly the amount of time necessary to do a true, ethnographic study of the hybrid culture that exists in El Paso. Thus, my research is limited to mere second-hand analyses of past studies done, like the one published by Isabel Velázquez. If I had had the means and the resources, I would have spent a significant amount of time in El Paso and other border communities. While there, I could have conducted interviews and found more hard evidence concerning the culture of the border region and the identities of the people who live there. Furthermore, I would have gone to Washington D.C. to conduct interviews with the Senators concerned with immigration reform. Because the legislation is so new, Internet research is inevitably filled with conjecture and speculation. I would have liked to obtain a more accurate idea of how the “Gang of Eight” senators felt about immigration reform and what their own personal priorities truly were. In this way, I could have better predicted the intended trajectory of

immigration reform in the years to come. However, as this is an undergraduate thesis, I gathered as many statistics and utilized other scholar's works in order to best articulate my argument.

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