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## Latino Cultural Assimilation in Adams County, PA: An Outsiders Perspective

Through the daily struggle to survive in an often hostile environment, ethnic minorities, particularly immigrants, construct self identities shaped by both their memories of the past, and the realities of their present situation. Such cultural identities, as Stuart Hall has observed, are a matter of becoming as well as being, and belong as much to the future as to the past. Hall explains that cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories, but like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

Such transformation has been particularly apparent among migrant and immigrant individuals and communities throughout the United States. By conducting ethnographic research as a participant in the 1998 American Mosaic Semester at Dickinson College, I had the opportunity to examine and explore the narratives of marginal immigrant and migrant farm labor in a rural working class community. Participating in this intensive community study gave me the opportunity to investigate the history and discourse of both local and national agriculture and farm labor, as well as the opportunity to conduct field work among the local Hispanic working class community. A good look into the history and discourse of such agriculture has shown that there is a lot more to this business than meets the eye. Additionally, spending a substantial amount of time with the workers and families has displayed a unique culture and the fragmentary nature of the identities that have been shaped as these individuals settle among a dominantly anglo community in the United States.

Illegal Aliens. Wetbacks. Migrant workers. Undocumented immigrants. These terms often bring to mind negative images of those individuals that migrate to this country, whether they have done so legally or illegally. For the most part, the larger society views these migrants as outsiders. They are often perceived by the dominant community as having an adverse effect on the quality of American life, causing financial burdens such as welfare, healthcare, court and jail costs. These and many other stereotypes, formed by media coverage, political discourse and race relations, have shaped complex and contradictory attitudes about migrants and immigrants. The reality, however, is that these immigrants do work most Americans will no longer do, bringing with them a profound work ethic, and a considerable contribution to the general productivity and welfare of the country. This ethnography will explore the creation of ethnic identities that have resulted from Hispanic immigration to a rural community in Central Pennsylvania. My intention is to shed some light on the identities formed through assimilation and acculturation by presenting the

fragmentary nature of everyday life that I have witnessed among these marginal immigrants.

As Leo Chavez explains in *Shadowed Lives*, a case study of migrant farmworkers in California, each migrant experiences a territorial passage which can be divided into three important phases. Although each individual's migration is unique, each consists of a *separation* from the known social group or society, and then *transition*, and *incorporation* into the new social group or society. Separation and transition are monumental experiences for migrants; they must undergo liminal periods of stopping and waiting, and they feel as if they are outsiders in the larger society. Because incorporation relies greatly on acceptance by the community and the larger society, immigrants ultimately depend on legal status to feel that they belong.

Driving south on Route 34 from Carlisle, one can't help but notice the miles of extensive fruit orchards that make up the vast agricultural landscape of Central Pennsylvania's Adams County. As one is conscious of this aesthetically pleasing landscape, rarely do they consider the narrative that lies behind the scenes. Farmers and workers long toiled and labored in the fields of Adams County, growing, harvesting, picking and processing fruits such as apples, peaches, cherries and pears. In the beginning of the century this work was done primarily by resident Anglo farmers and blacks who migrated from the south, however, for decades the majority of this agricultural labor has been imported. During World War II, Japanese and German prisoners of war were introduced to farm labor camps in Adams County as southern blacks began to settle in larger cities. Also, during the 1940's groups of Puerto Rican and Haitian immigrants began arriving seasonally for fruit picking. It was not until the late 1950's that Mexicans, who have since become the largest immigrant population, arrived in central Pennsylvania for seasonal agriculture. Since that time, the influx of these laborers has steadily risen, and a large population, close to twenty percent in some towns, now inhabit the area.

For years, Adams County, which has been deemed the Apple Capital of the Pennsylvania, has been reliant upon such labor for a large portion of its productivity. A significant population of these Hispanic workers have migrated to the area for both seasonal, temporary and permanent work in both the fields and factories of its rural communities. Mexican males make up the majority of this growing population, accompanied by other Latin Americans, Puerto Ricans, Haitians and Jamaicans. While this surge of foreign labor began as seasonal migration, it is important to realize that many of these immigrants are settling in Adams County, and assimilating to the conditions of American capitalist culture.

Towns such as York Springs, Idaville, Aspers, Biglerville, Ardentsville and Gettysburg are among the many communities in Adams County that have transformed

as a result of this flow of foreign labor. These immigrants- part of the largest wave of immigration this country has seen since the early part of this century- are changing industries and fueling the area's economy even as they are exploited by long hours, harsh conditions and back breaking work. As a consumer culture, we tend to take for granted the hard work that must be invested in such an industry, and additionally, most Americans fail to realize that a large portion of this labor is done by immigrant and migrant workers.

As foreign immigration becomes a more widespread issue in the United States and regulation and prevention have become important issues, immigration policies have become a complex argument. Because many Americans feel that foreign migration is problematic, negative immigrant sentiment is commonly witnessed in everyday life. At the same time, a large portion of these individuals are staying and settling in the United States, forming new identities and assimilating to a culture that systematically excludes and rejects them.

It is apparent in Adams County that, for the most part, the migrants are viewed as outsiders by the larger society. In York Springs, for example, (which many residents have nicknamed >Tijuana Springs=) I sensed a deep animosity toward Mexicans from several residents and local store owners. The owner of the hardware store claimed that he was losing business from his regular customers because the store was always overcrowded with too many Mexicans. Another merchant claimed that the Mexicans were always drinking and causing trouble, often leaving the scent of marijuana lingering in the air. Several residents told me about a soccer field that was condemned because the Mexicans apparently trashed it.

While not all residents of Adams County have negative views about the immigrant population, it is obvious that certain hostilities and stereotypes prevail. Many members of the dominant society feel that these immigrants have an adverse effect on the quality of American life, disrupting the community, causing financial burdens such as welfare, healthcare, court and jail costs. These and many other stereotypes, formed by media coverage, political discourse and race relations, have shaped complex and contradictory attitudes about migrants and immigrants throughout history. The reality, however, is that these immigrants do work most Americans will no longer do, bringing with them a profound work ethic, and a considerable contribution to the general productivity and welfare of the country.

Mexicans have been among the most numerous and significant of immigrant groups in the United States during the twentieth century. They number well over the half the total current Latino population of 30 million- a population destined to become America's largest minority group within the next thirty years.

Why do these immigrants come to the United States? There are various reasons for immigration, but the primary determinant is a better economic opportunity; the same reason that their ancestors immigrated to the United States, and the same reason that many of our parents or grandparents immigrated here. While the decision to migrate to the United States is often complex, it is important to consider the historical movement of Mexicans in and out of this country.

The history of Mexican immigration to the United States can be traced back to The Mexican War (1846-48). Prior to that time, a vast portion of the American Southwest was Mexican Territory. The war resulted in U.S. citizens moving into territory previously owned by Mexico. Then, in the beginning of this century, Mexicans became a preferred labor force in the southwest, and eventually a suitable alternative for America's labor hungry agricultural fields and factories. During times such as these, when inexpensive labor has not been readily available, the government has implemented short term solution policies to help employers obtain cheap labor from Mexico. In 1942, The United States adopted the Bracero Program, a guest worker program which laid the foundation for the migration of generations to come. Although only intended to last throughout World War II, the program continued for 22 years. When the Bracero Program finally ended in 1964, the demand for the cheap labor it provided remained. In addition, returning braceros encouraged their own children to seek a higher status, to migrate to the United States in hopes of obtaining a better existence than their parents enjoyed. From 1945 to 1987, the number of farms fell from almost six million to two million, while the average farm size more than doubled. As family farmers left the land, the proportion of hired labor rose steadily. Mexicans migrate to the United States because there are jobs waiting for them here, many of which pay seven to ten times more than in Mexico.

With Mexican males as my main focus, I have been able to conduct field work through recruiting and home visits, as well as interning at a local center for migrant education. I have had the opportunity to get to know several of the students as well as their fellow workers, families and friends. By conducting both formal and informal interviews and oral histories, assisting in GED, ESL, art and photo classes, and spending many hours of my spare time with these immigrants, I have encountered an assembly of uniquely fragmented individuals, torn between the memories of their past and the reality of the host culture.

The men I encountered in my fieldwork consisted of both documented and undocumented workers. These workers have migrated to the United States for various reasons, economic situations being the main determinants. In Adams County, nearly everyone I spoke to stressed the poor economic situation of their homeland and emphasized hopes of upward mobility in terms of increased income in the United

States. For the most part, better economic conditions seem to be the principal reason for Mexican and Latin American migration to the United States.

Jobs that most Americans are unwilling to do are open to these newcomers, and although these jobs often insinuate low economic status, they are critical to the economy. The historical, economic and social links between Mexico and the United States are immense and the overlap of economic structures have bound our two countries together. Mexican workers and U.S. employers have become part of one international labor market and the need for labor has pulled many Mexicans north to the United States where they know jobs are waiting for them.

These immigrants have flocked to certain occupations because of skills brought from their homelands, shifts in local economics and community networks. Many, especially those who don't speak English well, have chosen occupations with little public contact, such as factory or field work, simply to support families here and back home. Once a few progress in particular industries, informal networks take over; workers often get connections through relatives, and end up concentrated in particular occupations or niches. Many workers come to the United States for temporary or seasonal labor but often end up staying for several years or settling permanently. This has largely been the case in Adams County, as many migrants have decided to stay and settle in the area. As these immigrants decide to stay and settle among the dominant anglo communities, they are forced to cope with fragmented lifestyles, torn between their native culture and a new culture that many feel they are rejected by. Regardless of their intentions to assimilate, change is unavoidable. Each newcomer is faced with various new situations; they must adapt to environmental influences and conform to new cultural habits, practices and traditions.

Both the decision to cross the border and the actual experience itself are monumental to all immigrants, yet unique to each individual or family going across. Crossing illegally is an especially memorable experience for all immigrants, as I have been told by many who have done so. It is both a physical and symbolic experience that marks the beginning of the transition phase in the undocumented immigrants territorial passage. Several migrants have shared their border crossing stories with me, telling multiple tales of apprehension, tragedy and success in their attempts at crossing over. Many have experienced such an encounter more than once, as they have gone back and forth assisting family members with a safe crossover.

The characteristics of the Mexican family are important to consider when looking at the history of migration to Adams County. Oftentimes the decision to migrate north is a family issue. Many fathers, husbands and older sons have left their families to travel north with hopes of improving the economic situation of the family. In many cases, they believed that the migration would be temporary; after they had earned their

targeted amount they would return to their families and homeland. However, upon finding a stable job, many immigrants have decided to stay and work, at least long enough to make some extra money. This period often becomes extended when they realize how much better their financial situation is in the United States. In addition to financial mobility, many immigrants see the United States as an opportunity for their children to get ahead. Many claimed that they wanted their children to take advantage of the educational opportunities that they were denied growing up.

Whatever their reasons for coming may be, one thing is certain, many are here to stay, and assimilation is inevitable. Those that choose to stay in the United States face daily obstacles that necessitate transition into a new and different society. Cultural adaptations have marked the transition from a Mexican to a Mexican American lifestyle. Cultural adaptations occur gradually, particularly among those who have made conscious decisions to remain in the United States. Assimilation of one cultural group into another can be evidenced by changes in language preference, adoption of common attitudes and values, membership in common social groups and institutions, and loss of separate political, religious or ethnic identification. The dominant values of society are transmitted to its members through the process of socialization, which conditions the individual to internalize as his own attitudes, the existent values of society. As Chavez explains in *Shadowed Lives*, immigrants and socially mobile individuals appear culturally invisible because they are no longer what they once were and not yet what they could become.

When a person or a cultural group is cut off from its own feelings, personal sources and institutions they are also cut off from their creative depths. While some Latinos gain an identity by holding onto a past, others attempt to forget their past by assimilation, which creates a fragmented sense of reality. Accepting the real, >objective= world of others causes them to dependently link themselves to the host group. In this case they become who they are by being interdependent with others. Yet if the others in the greater society reject them until they become assimilated, they enter into society feeling like lesser beings. Immigrants are deprived of shaping their private and public lives through an alarming trend toward a hierarchical society.

As several Hispanic Americans have explained, they are faced with a culture much different than in Mexico or Latin America. Their new realities are structurally defined by institutionally enacted capitalist principles and they must respond to them in their everyday life and experience. Since Mexican migrants move between two countries- one highly industrialized and the other severely impoverished- they have been among the first to experience what some call the post modern condition.

Through the daily struggle to survive in an oftentimes hostile environment, these newcomers have constructed a fragmented world for themselves, shaped both by their

memories of their past lives and by the reality of their present situation. Their ethnicity is not a fixed set of customs surviving from life in Mexico, but rather a collective identity that has emerged from daily experiences in the United States. Each has assumed a new ethnic identity, through a cultural orientation which accepts the possibilities of a future in their new land. Accepting this new ethnic identity is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the immigrant lifestyle. Mexican Americans and Hispanics in Adams County have been faced with the challenge of assimilation through language barriers and new familial structures, roles and traditions as well as different living conditions, occupations, religious practices, education, popular culture events and styles.

Perhaps the most significant change in the life of these Hispanics is the difference in family structure. Because the family, both immediate and extended, plays a huge role in the life of Hispanics, migration itself inevitably disrupts familial ties, often forcing members on both sides of the border to adjust to a new constellation of individuals. Individual families have acculturated and adapted to the differences of American life in many ways. Each family experiences periods of conflict and crisis as well as stability. The search for stability has encouraged Mexican immigrants to assume new roles with their families, at work, and as American consumers. Although the degree of each family's acculturation varies, all immigrants have to make adjustments, and new identities are constantly being formed. In addition to changing identities, cultural practices and other aspects of Mexican culture are transformed as American consumerism contributes to assimilation.

When asked what the most astonishing difference was between the two cultures, several men contended that male/ female relationships were acutely different here than in Mexico. A large portion of these men noted that American women are more liberal and have more freedom than in Mexico, where women are more restricted and dependent upon men. Spending a good deal of time with two key informants, I can recall several incidents in which they expressed shock over gender related cultural differences. These men explained that it was insulting for a woman to pay for anything when they were together, and an embarrassment for her to even offer. I also sensed confusion among men when I opened doors for them, walked curbside, and denied gifts they offered to buy. It is apparent that the position of females in the United States contrasts a good deal from their traditional role in Mexico.

Mexican women in the United States are also faced with conflicting roles as both wives and mothers. It is evident that motherhood has forced many to assume dual cultural roles; adhering to some traditional Mexican child rearing practices, while at the same time adopting those of the new culture. This difference in role perception seems directly related to the degree of acculturation present, which accelerates with each subsequent generation. Immigrants who have settled with, or raised families in

the United States, have been exposed to an extent of assimilation that is undeniably greater than single immigrants.

A major factor that has contributed to this assimilation has been education. School has exposed children to a different set of values and expectations than their parents. In many cases children are taught English while their parents speak only Spanish because they did not have the time or opportunity learn English. Children begin to assimilate to the new culture through the traditions and practices they are exposed to at school. They are often the first to introduce the family to certain American cultural trends, foods, clothing or activities that are incompatible with traditional Mexican customs. Though changes are also evident in the values and practices of the immigrant generation, a more profound adaptation usually occurs among their children.

While many Mexican and Hispanic families have settled in Adams County, many of the migrants are single men. These men, who often live in communal living situations, are not faced with as much daily anglo contact as those who have settled in a family unit. When sharing their living quarters with other migrant males, they are able to retain a stronger sense of their native culture and language because they are more isolated from the dominant society. In the case of the undocumented, men may live and work on the same farm, seldom leaving the property. In such cases they do not have much contact with the dominant society, and thus are not exposed to the same degree of assimilation as those that have gained legal status or have settled families. Because many remain socially excluded from the community, they have formed identities that cling to life in Mexico.

More than almost any other aspect of life, religion threaded itself into the fabric of village life in Mexico. The local Catholic church was a cornerstone of community stability, invariably located in the central plaza. Upon migrating to the United States, Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been faced with a starkly different religious perspective. Masses are spoken in English, which inhibits Spanish speakers to participate. Catholic religious practice has increasingly narrowed to female participation and has become less of a community celebration and more a set of rituals performed at home. One may find a Catholic picture in every room of an immigrants house, but they will rarely be seen at the religious services at the parish. Some workers attribute their absence to extended hours on the weekends and others are just too tired to attend mass on their only day off. Whatever the case may be, most do not feel that they are getting much out of attending mass here in the United States.

In addition to not attending Sunday mass, many Catholic religious rituals changed. For many members of the second generation, the traditions performed in the United States are their only connection to life in Mexico. Instead of being held in private homes and on the streets as they are in Mexico, immigrants rent halls to hold



festivities. One Mexican American male told a story of how his a friends family was denied use of a rental hall because they had a bad experience with the last group of Hispanics that rented it out. However, when his American wife called back to request the hall, they immediately rented it to her.

For adolescents and teenagers, lack of parental authority leads to new freedom in dating patterns and marriage. Whereas in Mexico it was unacceptable to marry or date out of one=s ethnic group, such practices have become more and more common among Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States. Several of the males in Adams County mentioned that upon arriving in the United States, their views on interethnic relationships changed. Marital ties with outside groups have become more common with those more culturally assimilated into American society.

Another apparent change among those who have migrated to Adams County can be seen in their clothing style. Many have adopted popular American styles and name brand labels that are often spotlighted by the media. It is common to see these Mexicans Americans wearing designer labels such as Polo Sport, Tommy Hilfiger, and Nautica as well as popular sports and leisure logos such as Nike and Adidas. Many of the men often wear baseball caps and clothing monogrammed with NFL, NHL and NBA insignia. The transition from traditional Mexican styles of clothing is apparent as many have exchanged cowboy hats and boots for baseball caps and sneakers. Additionally, other uniquely American emblems such as Disney and popular cartoon characters are prevalent among the children. Enacting such mainstream cultural ideals by wearing such labels has reified group identity. While these immigrants are attempting to create an outer image, the underlying social processes are hidden by these assimilatory commodities.

While it is obvious that many of these immigrants have bought into popular American fashion trends, many blend them with styles that are uniquely Mexican. These expressive styles represent the overlapping and fragmentary elements of assimilation because they are merging alternative and shared identities. While Mexicans have historically displayed styles that symbolize identification with marginality and have intentionally flaunted their alienation from the dominant society through images of opposition, it is apparent that today=s immigrant population has combined these alternative styles with the popular culture of the dominant society.

Through assimilation and acculturation, Mexicans, Mexican Americans and other Latinos have adopted a variety of the beliefs and behaviors of American society. Although many Mexicans in Adams County have attempted to retain their Mexican ethnicity, they have transferred a good deal of cultural elements through the inevitable processes of socialization.

Approaching the communities of Adams County as an ethnographic fieldworker has given me the opportunity to conduct an extensive variety of research and interviews, as well as assume the role of participant observer.

I found ethnography and field work to be extremely positive approaches to this community study because these methods allowed me to go out into the community as a first hand participant observer. Being emerged fieldwork also allowed me to collect my own data and gave me a unique opportunity to form my own theories and hypotheses. By observing the detailed narratives of these individuals, I obtained a better understanding of farm labor and the social conditions of the communities that are composed of marginal groups. Additionally, I was able to assemble a new perspective of my own culture through the experience of these newcomers. Because a culture is expressed or constituted only by the actions and words of its members, it must be interpreted, not given to, a fieldworker. Hands on interaction with the communities in Adams County gave me the unequaled opportunity to interpret the formation of transcreational identities that

have resulted from Hispanic and Mexican assimilation into American society.