

Narrative: Assimilation or Integration? – The Attraction of the Middle Class

Tamás Vraukó*

University of Miskolc

Abstract:

Works written by minority authors (or written by majority authors about minority) are often referred to as "assimilation narrative." In the paper several works written by Chicano and other Hispanic authors in the U. S. will be used to examine certain features of the complexity of the issue. Very often – although certainly not always – what the authors seek is not *assimilation*; they wish to integrate into a society that affords reasonable welfare and safety, but they do not wish to give up their ethnic-national and religious traditions and background. Among others, works by Luis Rodriguez, Piri Thomas, Julia Alvarez, Richard Dokey and Sandra Cisneros will be used to illustrate various dimensions the wide variety of literature usually treated under the umbrella term of "assimilation narrative." Although the focus of the paper is prose, other genres – e.g. Campesino Theatre – will also be mentioned in order to complement the analysis.

Key words: narrative, assimilation, immigration, Hispanic literature

In literary theory and literary history the works of (ethnic) minority authors – and similarly, the works of authors dealing with minorities – are often referred to as "assimilation narrative." This term tends to suggest that the authors of works of minority authors produced in the language of the majority of the people living in the country concerned seek a place in society through assimilation. Assimilation, however, means melting up in the majority nation by adopting all the values, customs and way of life characteristic of the majority, and abandoning, leaving behind, giving up the original traditional values, ethics, lifestyle, religion, etc. of the minority. Assimilation means disappearing without a trace, continuing life as a new person, with new values, language, a whole set of new cultural assets. In this paper an effort is made to show that this is in fact *not* what many of the ethnic minority writers look for, so the term *assimilation narrative* is in many, although certainly not all, the cases erroneously applied.

*Tamás Vraukó was born in Békéscsaba, Hungary in 1959. Married, with two daughters (21 and 18). Studied at the University of Debrecen, graduated as a teacher of English and Hungarian in 1987, earned a university doctoral degree in linguistics in 1994 from the same university. Completed a second diploma course in British Studies at the University of Warsaw and the John Ruskin College in 1993-1995, and earned a PhD in American literature from the University of Warsaw in 2004. At present Tamás Vraukó is on the faculty of the Institute of Modern Philology, University of Miskolc, Hungary. Email: aitvrauko@uni-miskolc.hu

What many minority authors expect from the majority society is a chance for *integration*. From their point of view, integration is a lot more positive term, as it suggests the possibility for active participation in the life of society. It does not involve the abandonment of their original cultural heritage, but offers the advantages of participating in the life of the country.

Examples to illustrate the necessity of differentiating between *assimilation* and *integration* when labelling minority writings will be taken from the works of Hispanic American authors. It is, naturally, possible to obtain similar instances from the literature of other minorities of the United States and/or other countries, but for constraints of space, the examples will be limited to the literature of Hispanics in this paper.

A novel that rapidly received great acclaim is *Always Running—La Vida Loca: Gang Days in Los Angeles* by Luis Rodriguez. This is the story of a young boy's way to maturity. Rodriguez's novel is based upon his own life, and he received prizes for *non-fiction*. In his novel the hero runs his race alone, and there are in fact very few who help him. There are many more of those who work against him directly or indirectly.

One of the characters who always support young Luis without reservations is his mother. The mother in Rodriguez's novel matches the traditional Chicana mother who, against all difficulties, financial and other, keeps the family together. She is, however, not the romantic beauty with the raven-black hair, often found in stereotypical images of Mexican women:

Mama always seemed to be sick. [...] she was overweight and suffered from [...] diabetes. She had thyroid problems, bad nerves and high blood pressure. She was still young then [...] in her thirties, but she had all the ailments. She didn't even have teeth; [...] Despite this she worked all the time, [...] and held up the family when almost everything else came apart. (Rodriguez, 1993 : 23)

The last sentence is particularly important, as Mama, with her ability to keep the family together, will be one of the cyclically returning images throughout the whole novel, until Rodriguez will at the end be able to offer his own positive experience to his son.

Women described in novels and short stories often suffer under a double burden: one is the generally underprivileged situation of the Chicanos, and the other is the lack of a

man – a husband, a father of their children, a permanent partner, a wage earner – in the family. In this situation the mother becomes what Charles Ramirez Berg describes as follows:

The naive, good-natured, long-suffering mother, [...] is the norm [...] and the typical way ethnic mothers are portrayed in Hollywood movies in general. In the assimilation narrative the mother figure serves as the font of genuine ethnic values and the protagonist's (and the narrative's) cultural conscience. When the hero listens to 'his people' he is listening to his mother. (Berg, 1992:38).

The *barrio* was a place that distorted many of the basic values of the Chicanos and other Hispanics. Such was *máchismo*. Originally, *máchismo* used to mean that men were allowed to have relationship with other women outside marriage, it was in fact a sign of their masculinity, but most of them did not desert their families, they supported and provided for wife and children. In the *barrio*, masculine pride often meant that they had several children from many different women, but they did not care much about the children or the women.

For a young man, identification with a gang began to replace identification with a family.

The *barrio*, while distorts traditional values, also acts like a trap—several times, whenever somebody appears to have a chance of breaking out, the *barrio* with its misery, deprivation, prejudice and petty crime prevents him or her from succeeding. But the first thing – and one of the most important – that we learn about the *barrio* is that it is not exclusively a Spanish-speaking community. There are other nationalities there as well, because poverty is just as important a fact in bringing people to the *barrio* as nationality:

large numbers of Asians from Japan, Korea and Taiwan also moved into the area. Sections of Monterey Park and even San Gabriel became known as Little Japans or Chinatowns. [...] The barrios which were not incorporated [...] became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion. (Rodriguez, 1993:40-41).

“Incorporated” means that a town has its own public services and utilities and normal housing conditions—middle-class, as opposed to the slums of the immigrants.

Another recurrent image – or rather event – is the drop-out of school. The drop-out is usually the end of a hopeless, or sometimes not completely hopeless, effort to catch up with the mainstream society. The *barrio* Luis lives in is deeply embedded in a big city, and any chance of finding a decent job and earning a middle-class salary is good education. Luis is growing up in his own community, relatively isolated from an unfriendly and not receptive but remote mainstream America. A similarly hindering factor is police harassment – Chicanos are often subject to arbitrary and excessively rude police action. Police action is, however, a highly controversial issue in the novel. Young Luis's life is spent in a way a natural part of which is petty crime – burglary, mugging, theft and street fighting. Still, police action is not regarded by the *pachucos* as an act of law enforcement and a retaliation for something that is not right – it always remains harassment, the sole reason for which is racial.

Rodriguez does not explain what he thinks about interrelation between poverty and petty crime, but he describes the risks of this way of life, as he tells several stories when, as a child, he was very close to committing a murder, thus becoming a serious offender. Explanation only comes later in the novel:

'You stole from me. You have to pay for it.'

'I don't mind that. The problem is we end up paying more for the same thing than other people do. On this side of town, the cops don't beat up people. On this side of town, the cops don't stop you for no reason. They don't be hitting you in the head, trying to make you mad so you do something you regret later. (Rodriguez, 1993:144).

At school most Chicano boys and girls do not have an adequate preliminary education, they very often struggle with the language, and even when they are juvenile criminals, they are offended that they are treated as juvenile criminals. At these passages Rodriguez does not make any comments and does not suggest any solution, apart from the fully justified complaint that the educational authorities did not provide for proper Spanish-language education. The fact that for decades nothing really happened in recognition of the educational needs of one of the largest ethnic groups in America, affords a rather sad image of the woeful shortcomings of the American educational system. In fact, providing for adequate Spanish education would have been just one possible solution. Paying more

attention to teaching English with special and effective methodology to those whose mother tongue was different, could have been another way of addressing the problem, but this apparently did not happen either. It seems that for decades (Anglo-)American school boards and police departments behaved as if they had believed that the presence of “foreigners” in their country was a transitory phenomenon. They believed that all they had to do was wait, and these people would disappear, and all the social, educational and other problems with them, relieving the majority society of all obligation to do something for them. On top of page 120 of the novel Luis is glad that he is fired from school – at the bottom of the page he regrets that he has to do a dirty and humiliating job.

There are two factors in the novel that finally pushed Rodriguez towards the first efforts at finding some sort of a solution to his apparently hopeless life. One is the senseless violence of gang life in the streets.

In order to become a member of a gang, one has to undergo a cruel “inauguration” ritual. The ritual has its own choreography, the players know their parts, and the preparations have, in their own grotesque and bizarre way, some dignity. But the reader will soon forget that, when reads lines like these:

Topo swung a calloused fist at my face. I went down fast. Then an onslaught of steel-tipped shoes and heels rained on my body. I thought I would be able to swing and at least hit one or two—but no way! Then I [...] pulled my arms over my head, covered it the best I could while the kicks seemed to stuff me beneath a parked car.

Finally the barrage stopped. [...] Hands came at me to congratulate. There were pats on the back. (Rodriguez, 1993:110)

In addition to being increasingly nauseated by the violence and destruction, Luis received another impetus that helped him continue his own personal *Bildungsroman*. As a result of the gang wars and the increasing crime rate, the authorities finally realized that there was something wrong, and paid more attention to the problems of the Hispanics. Community and educational programmes were launched and to those who were ready and willing to accept it, help was offered.

Luis discovers for himself that art and literature may be a point of breakout of his miserable situation. First he paints murals, a common activity among *barrio* boys. It was

recognized by social organizations, and they soon made efforts to organize the painters by selecting walls, agreeing with the owners of the property, and providing paint and brushes to the participants in the programme.

A real revelation for Luis was literature. He went to the library, and under the suspicious and contemptuous eyes of the librarian he selected books for himself:

And then there was Piri Thomas, a Puerto Rican brother, *un camarada de aquellas*: his book *Down These Mean Streets* became a living Bible for me. I dog-eared it, wrote in it, copied whole passages so I wouldn't forget their texture, the passion, this searing work of a street dude and hype in Spanish Harlem—a barrio boy like me, on the other side of America. (Rodriguez, 1993:138).

Luis Rodriguez was lucky as he came of age together, in fact hand in hand, with the Chicano Movement. Still, the Movement in itself was not sufficient. He needed his own will, his own determination to change things for the better. This is what makes Luis's story a real *Bildungsroman*. His efforts to catch up with the mainstream of American society – elevating himself to the level of middle class – seem to refute what Nobel Prize-winning Mexican author Octavio Paz says about the *pachuco* – young Mexican-American – not wanting to become a part of American life. Rodriguez makes it clear when he says, “It's about time we become part of America.” (Rodriguez, 1993:212) Integration does not necessarily mean assimilation. It does mean involvement, participation, through which they may find a way to *join* in a “nation of joiners:”

‘What would you want me to tell my students about how they can fulfill their responsibilities as citizens?’ one of us used to ask at the conclusion of his interview with community leaders. Almost always the characteristically American answer was ‘Tell them to get involved!’ The United States is a nation of joiners. (Bellah, 1996:167).

The Hispanics do long for America and all the positive things American way of life has to offer – and it does not mean that they want to give up their identity. On the contrary – finding their own identity, creating literature and arts based on their own traditions help them in fighting for their rights and due place in American society more effectively. Chicano

poetry, Campesino Theatre and Chicano prose all call for action: "Action is much more effective, when backed by knowledge of one's roots." (Leal and Barrón, 1983:13)

The book that became "a living Bible" for Luis Rodriguez is also autobiographical. The story takes place a generation earlier than Rodriguez's, but the situations of the two authors are very similar. Thomas's situation is complicated by his skin being darker than that of the average Latino. His quest for identity is therefore even harder and more complicated than Rodriguez's, and more severe are the trials and tribulations he is going through. Rodriguez did not serve a long prison sentence before his final decision to radically change his life. The similarities between the two novels-and the two lives-are, however, greater than the differences. In fact, it often appears that certain elements of Rodriguez's novel are based or modelled upon Thomas's. On page X of his Prologue to the novel, Thomas writes: "I am... Unsatisfied, hoping, and always reaching." (Thomas, 1997:X). This clause, "always reaching," may have inspired Rodriguez's selection of a title for his novel. Similarly to *Always Running*, Thomas's story is that of a Hispanic boy growing up in an American city in the 20th century. Similarly to *Always Running*, at the beginning of *Down these Mean Streets* the family is together, father, mother, and children in the same household. The role of the mother is incomparably more important than that of the father, another similarity between the two novels, between the two lives. Thomas sr. makes efforts to be a good father, his son looked up to him, but after a while he somehow vanishes from the life of his son.

Thomas's mother is not an enchanting beauty either: "I looked at fat little Moms standing there with a very serious look on her face." (Thomas, 1997:18). The "fat little Moms" will be the focus of the family, and it is not her fault that at the end her son strayed away from the family and ended up on the wrong side of the law.

Rodriguez describes the *barrio* as place where misery was just as important a factor in bringing people together as nationality. Young Piri Thomas soon learns that misery may have a nationality: "[In the Home Relief Office] Most of the people were Puerto Ricans and Negroes; a few were Italians. It seemed that every mother had brought a kid to interpret for her." (Thomas, 1997:41-42). The children, a step ahead of the their first-generation immigrant parents in integration into their new homeland, picked up more English at school and in the streets than their mothers did. Piri translates for her mother, and the relief officer answers in Spanish-he may have picked up a few words and uses them out of courtesy, and

it is likely that he meets Hispanics so often that it was not difficult to learn the basics of the language.

Thomas often uses rude language, although at the beginning of the novel his parents make efforts to dissuade him from that, keeping the boy within the framework of decent Catholic upbringing. As Piri reaches his adolescent age, and spends more time with other kids from the neighbourhood, these efforts are hopeless. By the time he has a job as a shoeshine boy, he is a shrewd street kid, with tricks of extracting big tips from customers. Here, class has nationality again, as "Sir" is more often used than "Señor," indicating that middle-class customers, having their shoes cleaned in the streets, tended to be Anglos. Petty crime for young Piri is just as natural as it is for young Rodriguez. He describes a case when he stole \$10 from a girl as poor as he, and explained it as "it was her or me, and as always, it had to be me." (Thomas, 1997:98).

It appears to be a desperate fight for survival, but it was not. Poverty was not the first and foremost problem for these young men. We learn from the novel that although they were not at all very wealthy and they turned up at the Home Relief Office every now and then, they had a bathroom, regularly had decent food, and enjoyed amenities that were unavailable for most boys of the the same age in wartime Europe, let alone other continents. Piri's family even moved out of Spanish Harlem to a detached house, which was the first sign of starting a lower middle-class life. Stealing \$10 from a poor girl who badly needed the money was an act definitely not dictated by desperate starvation. It was a means of demonstrating superiority, showing an ability of being able to survive under all circumstances. For most of the boys spending their time in the streets the real problem was a lack of a real community to belong to-lack of a sense of belonging. They tried and regularly failed:

The next day I was back on the stoop, slinging sound with my boys, yakking about everything we knew about and also what we didn't, placing ideas on the common altar, splitting the successes and failures of all. That was the part of belonging, the good and bad; it was for all of you. (Thomas, 1997:54)

"My boy(s)" is a recurrent term all through the novel, to the very last pages. "His boys" were the real community for Piri Thomas, the community to which he believed he

belonged. It was a false belief, but young Piri failed to recognise that. During his search for a community to belong to, he faces racial prejudice as well. It is a slow and painful recognition for him to understand that it does not matter for people that he is not an African-American; his dark skin makes him Black, and that is it. A particularly humiliating experience for him is when he tries to date a "*muchacha blanca*," a white girl.

Even in these early days a characteristic pattern of response to the American Negro could be seen in the Puerto Rican community. For the Puerto Ricans are a mixed people. And while in their own minds a man's color meant something very different from what it meant to white Americans, they knew very well its meaning for Americans. (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970:92)

Through the story Piri undertakes various jobs, starting with shining shoes, but the jobs are all low-paid positions for unskilled laborers and Piri is dissatisfied with the situation, just as Rodriguez will be a few decades later. He also fails to recognize the interrelation between low-paid and humiliating jobs and the lack of education and trade. In the hope of finding a community to integrate into, he takes a trip to the South, where African-Americans live in higher numbers. When working for his voyage aboard a ship, young Piri refers to it as "coolie" work; he does not recognize that he has no qualification whatsoever that would entitle/enable him to do any other kind of work. Naturally, the inadequate educational system that did not take into account the needs of ethnic minorities did not help Piri to recognise the importance of good education for social progress.

As low-paid jobs did not yield the amount of money Piri and "his boys" needed, they took to petty crime. Drug trafficking, shoplifting, becoming a drug addict and finally armed robbery signify the stations in the personal education of Piri Thomas. But even when he is sentenced for the armed robbery, he does not recognise that the punishment for his crime was just and fair, or at least that a crime is to be followed by some kind of a punishment: "The reasoning that my punishment was deserved was absent." (Thomas, 1997:255-256). This was the same in Rodriguez's work, who at the beginning believed that punishment for various crimes was an unfair retaliation from the majority society: "The problem is we end up paying more for the same thing than other people do." (Rodriguez, 1993:144)

The recognition that learning a trade or learning for a high school diploma might be a good breakout comes slowly. First learning is nothing more than a way of spending the long years in prison. The first signs that learning is a good way of understanding oneself, a way of

finding our place in the world, come late in the novel: "Learning made me painfully aware of life and me. What had I been? How had I become that way? What could I be? How could I make it?" (Thomas, 1997:298)

This recognition came together with Piri's return to his Catholicism. For somebody as deep in the hardships of life as Piri Thomas, religion was a considerable help in finding the way out. In prison he learns about the role of religion in life in general, he learns from the Muslims that a man needs to have human dignity, regardless of race and color. This is an important factor in making Thomas able to accept himself. When he is out of prison, he perhaps for the first time in his life, recognizes simple, basic facts of life. Now it seems that being normal was cheap and easy, and being a drug addict was hell on Earth: "I made mental figures and my junkie *panín* needed seventy-two dollars a day to keep from coming apart – to stay normal. Something I was doing for nothing." (Thomas, 1997:298)

For Anaya, Rodriguez and Piri Thomas the traditional values of their ethnic community – their roots – are important, but there are also those who are willing to leave their own roots behind, who have different ideas about "joining" the mainstream society. Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* aims at less than Rodriguez's novel. Cisneros' ambitions are primarily personal – she longs for a personal American dream: a decent middle-class lifestyle. The story, similarly to Rodriguez's and Thomas's works, is highly autobiographical. Esperanza has positive memories of her mother only. Her memories about her father are either neutral or explicitly negative, when his snoring at night disturbed the others. The reason why fathers are relatively unimportant characters in both Rodriguez' and Cisneros' works is perhaps that they fail as providers. They are supposed to provide their families with American living standards, financial stability, good education for the children, but in the *barrio* they are unable to do so. Rodriguez and Thomas often refer to the place they used live in as *barrio*, whereas Cisneros does not. In her novel not even the word *barrio* is used.

The avoidance of the word *barrio* may come from the fact that Cisneros grew up in Chicago, a northern city, where the Hispanic community was smaller than in the cities of the Southwest. What we find in the novel is, however, not any different from any *barrio*: a rundown neighbourhood with small and crowded houses with many people with Hispanic names in it. At one point in the novel, Cisneros even draws up the geographical boundaries

of the *barrio*, when they try a new car and make a round trip in it, but the author does not use the word.

The suffering mother appears together with the image of the man who fails as a provider for the family. Where there is no reason for blaming a man for ignoring his family, the man is simply ugly and repulsive, whereas the woman is kind and attractive:

The grandpa slept on the living room couch and snored through his teeth. His feet fat and doughy like tamales, and he powdered and stuffed into white socks and brown leather shoes.

The grandma's feet were lovely as pink pearls and dressed in velvety high heels that made her walk with a wobble, but she wore them anyway because they were pretty. (Cisneros, 1991: 39).

It does not occur to the author that a man may also suffer, if from nothing else, then from some disease. Cisneros, unlike poetess Gloria Anzaldúa, has not become lesbian, but her rejection of the male sex makes her live alone. At the end of the novel Cisneros longs for a house of her own, and makes it clear what kind of a house it is going to be: "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With a porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. (...) Nobody's garbage to pick up after." (Cisneros, 1991:108)

In the case of Cisneros, the melting pot does not fail to melt; it functions well. Her desires are strictly personal, she does not mind melting up in American society, leaving behind her cultural and ethnic heritage. This is pure assimilation: personal goals, personal desires to be satisfied. Luis wanted to leave poverty and deprivation, Esperanza wanted to leave behind her entire former life, including her heritage, with all the negative and positive features and examples.

It is likely that we find fewer and fewer mothers suffering and serving the way described by Berg and Kitano. As an increasing number of Chicanos elevate themselves to middle class status, and more and more of them adopt values of the Anglo middle class, Chicanas become more "emancipated" as it is regarded by the mainstream society. During the demonstrations against the new immigration laws in the streets of the cities of California a few years ago, many women wearing the T-shirts of the *Latinos Unidos* fought for their rights side by side with men. But these were ethnic-conscious demonstrations – as turning away from old family values, and entirely giving up the role of the mother as the person

keeping the family together would probably be the same as giving up one of the most important core elements of Hispanic cultural heritage. Although the selection of these particular works might appear to be arbitrary, and a great number of any other works can be selected and arranged into various combinations for the purposes of an analysis, there is little doubt that another set of works would show a similarly great variety of themes and approaches, defying any simplifying categorization.

Works Cited

- Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima*. New York: Time Warner Books, 1994.
- Bellah, Robert N. et al. *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.
- Berg, Charles Ramirez. "Bordertown, the Assimilation Narrative, and the Chicano Problem Film." *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*. Chon Noriega (ed.). Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, Inc., 1991.
- Glazer, Nathaniel and Daniel P. Moynihan. *Beyond the Melting Pot. The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City*. M. I. T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1970.
- Gómez-Quíñones, Juan. *Chicano Politics. Reality and Promise, 1940-1990*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990.
- Leal, Luis and Pepe Barron. "Chicano Literature: an Overview." *Three American Literatures*. Ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. New York: MLA, 1983.
- Rodriguez, Luis. *Always Running. La Vida Loca. Gang Days in L. A.* New York: Touchstone, 1993.
- Shirley, Carl R. and Paula W. Shirley. *Understanding Chicano Literature*. University of South Columbia: Carolina Press, 1988.
- Thomas, Piri. *Down these Mean Streets*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.