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BILINGUAL BARBARIANS IN *LA BODA* AND *ESCUELA*: THE ADOLESCENCE AND ASSIMILATION OF TWO MIGRANT SISTERS

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that Hannah Weyer's documentaries *La boda* (2000) and *Escuela* (2002) use the metaphor of teen angst to explore how receiving countries tend to equate the process of successful immigration with that of reaching adulthood. With her unobtrusive camera work, Weyer invites the viewer to become aware of the disturbing parallel between the coming-of-age of the Luis sisters and the assimilation process imposed on them, as second-generation immigrants in the US. Navigating through different stages of adolescence, Liliana and Elizabeth struggle as much with the transition from children to grown-ups as they do with the unspoken cultural expectation that in order to climb the socio-economic ladder they are to leave their Mexican roots behind. Real-life examples of the "immigrant paradox" (Coll & Marks; Markides & Coreil; Portes & Zhou; Wirth), "the second generation revolt" (Gans) or "the second generation decline" (Perlmann & Waldinger), the sisters do not seem to continue the "straight-line assimilation" that was initiated by their parents (*cf.* Park & Burgess; Warner & Srole). Based on the zealous assumption that each generation that issues from immigration will go through a gradually smoother incorporation into mainstream society, the straight-line assimilation theory predicts upward mobility for each generation in matters of education and employment thanks to increasing residential concentration and intermarriage patterns, and decreasing ethnic distinctiveness in language use (Waters *et al.*). However, as Elizabeth and Liliana go through financial, legal, and educational turmoil, they do not simply poke holes in this overly enthusiastic theory. They demonstrate that with the way the American schooling and social security systems are currently designed, their demographic was always set up to fail anyway (*cf.* Berry; Berry *et al.*; Marks *et al.*).

Keywords: Migration; Documentary; Segmented Assimilation; Barbarian; Mexican Immigration

OS BÁRBAROS BILÍNGUES EM *LA BODA* E *ESCUELA*: A ADOLESCÊNCIA E ASSIMILAÇÃO DE DUAS IRMÃS MIGRANTES

Resumo: Nesse artigo, eu argumento que os documentários de Hannah Weyer, *La boda* (2000) e *Escuela* (2002), usam a metáfora da angústia adolescente para explorar como países receptivos tendem a igualar o processo bem sucedido de imigração com o de chegada à vida adulta. Com seu discreto trabalho de câmera, Weyer convida o espectador a tomar consciência do perturbador paralelismo entre a maioridade das irmãs Luis e o processo de assimilação imposto a elas, como segunda geração de imigrantes nos EUA. Percorrendo diferentes estágios da adolescência, Liliana e Elizabeth lutam tanto com a transição de crianças para adultas quanto com silenciosa expectativa cultural de que, por causa da necessidade de subir na escada socioeconômica, elas devem deixar sua descendência mexicana para trás. Exemplos reais do "paradoxo do imigrante" (Coll & Marks; Markides & Coreil; Portes & Zhou; Wirth), "a revolta da segunda geração" (Gans) ou "o declínio da segunda geração" (Perlmann & Waldinger), as irmãs não parecem continuar a "assimilação direta" que foi iniciada por seus pais (*cf.* Park & Burgess; Warner & Srole). Baseada na assunção de que cada geração resultante da imigração passará por um processo gradual de incorporação à sociedade geral, a teoria da assimilação direta prediz uma mobilidade ascendente para cada geração no que diz respeito à educação e ao emprego por causa da crescente concentração residencial e os padrões de casamento entre diferentes raças, e da diminuição da distinção étnica no uso da língua (Waters *et al*.). Todavia como Elizabeth e Liliana passam por turbulências financeiras, sociais e educacionais, elas não apenas demonstram falhas nessa teoria excessivamente entusiástica. Elas demonstram que do jeito que os sistemas de educação escolar e seguridade social americanos estão atualmente projetados, sua demografia foi sempre configurada para falhar de qualquer maneira (*cf.* Berry; Berry *et al*.; Marks *et al*.).
Palavras-chave: Migração; Documentário; Assimilação Segmentada; Bárbaro; Imigração Mexicana

In *La boda* (2000) and *Escuela* (2002), documentary maker Hannah Weyer attempts to disengage the notion of migration from the concept of illegality. In order to do so, she follows the Mexican-American Luis family as they migrate back and forth

between their home in Texas and the labor camps in California, in search of seasonal fieldwork. As it turns out, Weyer's migratory protagonists – father Eliazar, mother Juanita, and their 8 children – are not illegal aliens, but US citizens who have been forced to lead a transient lifestyle for a lack of other reliable job opportunities. In *La boda*, the focus is on Eliazar and Juanita's 22-year-old daughter Elizabeth and her upcoming wedding to Artemio, a Mexican bracero she met while working in the fields. The first of her siblings to graduate from high school, Elizabeth is nevertheless quite down-to-earth about her perspectives, needs, and wishes: all she wants is to get married, find decent housing, and make sure Artemio's papers for legal residence come through. Her little sister Liliana takes over in *Escuela* and follows in Elizabeth's footsteps to become the second Luis sibling to study beyond 8th grade. For the duration of an entire schoolyear, Weyer shadows buoyant and cheeky Liliana as she makes her debuts as a high school freshman. Indeed, because her migrant family follows the harvests across state borders and moves several times a year, Liliana has to enter two different schools and experience the novelty and anxiety of being "the new kid" twice over.

In this article, I argue that both documentaries use the metaphor of teen angst to explore how receiving countries tend to equate the process of successful immigration with that of reaching adulthood. With her unobtrusive camera work, Weyer invites the viewer to become aware of the disturbing parallel between the coming-of-age of the Luis sisters and the assimilation process imposed on them, as second-generation immigrants in the US. Navigating through different stages of adolescence, Liliana and Elizabeth struggle as much with the transition from children to grown-ups as they do with the unspoken cultural expectation that in order to climb the socio-economic ladder they are to leave their Mexican roots behind. Real-life examples of the "immigrant paradox" (Coll, Marks; Markides, Coreil; Portes, Zhou; Wirth) we seek to provide a better understanding of child and adolescent development in the contexts of parent immigration to the United States during the end of the

20th century and the beginning of the 21st. The families studied in this book represent those who have experienced immigration processes in a particular time and place, or perhaps better said – times and places. They represent part of a major demographic shift in the United States (See Chapter 1, this volume, "the second generation revolt" (Gans) or "the second generation decline" (Perlmann, Waldinger), the sisters do not seem to continue the "straight-line assimilation" that was initiated by their parents (*cf.* Park, Burgess; Warner, Srole). Based on the zealous assumption that each generation that issues from immigration will go through a gradually smoother incorporation into mainstream society, the straight-line assimilation theory predicts upward mobility for each generation in matters of education and employment thanks to increasing residential concentration and intermarriage patterns, and decreasing ethnic distinctiveness in language use (Waters *et al.*). However, as Elizabeth and Liliana go through financial, legal, and educational turmoil, they do not simply poke holes in this overly enthusiastic theory. They demonstrate that with the way the American schooling and social security systems are currently designed, their demographic was always set up to fail anyway (*cf.* Berry; Berry *et al.*; Marks *et al.*)

Weyer's depiction of the Luis sisters does not point fingers at their attachment to their parents' homeland or the Mexican twang of their English speech. On the contrary, the camera seems to celebrate Elizabeth and Liliana's biculturalism and bilingualism by capturing the curiously refreshing and unique ways in which they respond to situations where their Mexican and American worlds collide. That being said, as much as *Escuela* and *La boda* mitigate the demonizing accounts of barbaric Hispanics that have become part and parcel of the American collective unconscious (*cf.* Fraga, Segura; Huntington, 2004a, 2004b; Nail; Rodriguez *et al.*; Schildkraut), they also step away from romanticizing the counterhegemonic notions of hybridity and *mestizaje* as promoted by the likes of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1996), and so on (*cf.* Moreman(a); Valdivia; Vila).

Monolingualism and Assimilation

La boda was first broadcast on PBS in June 2000 as part of the award-winning public television series POV – America's longest-running showcase of independent documentaries. *Escuela* aired in August 2002 and is presented on the POV website as a "follow-up" to *La boda*: a "compassionate portrait" of yet another member of the Luis family (*Escuela* | *POV* | *PBS*, n.d.). A documentary tandem, *La boda* and *Escuela* play Elizabeth and Liliana's sisterly characters off of each other and comment – directly and indirectly – on their lives, highs and lows, dreams and fears. If Elizabeth's marriage functions as the catalyst and climax of *La boda*, then *Escuela* jumps on *La boda*'s bandwagon and builds on its momentum. *Escuela* adds a new dimension to Elizabeth's life journey by way of Liliana's filmic narrative, which serves the purpose of both a sequel and a prequel to the older sister's nuptials.

Essentially a frenzied build-up to Elizabeth and Artemio's wedding ceremony, *La boda* places Elizabeth firmly at the heart of the plot. The other members of the Luis family – among whom is a mischievous little girl nicknamed "Lili" who is barely acknowledged by the camera – play second fiddle. Weyer appears to cast them in the role of Elizabeth's unsuspecting Greek chorus, interviewed and highlighted only to enhance the bride's actions, words, cogitations. In *Escuela*, however, Liliana does not always take center stage. Her cumbersome high school experience echoes Elizabeth's, who regularly makes guest appearances in – what is supposed to be – Lili's film and thus punctuates her little sister's teenage existence with dramatic glimpses of what her future might hold. The mood in *Escuela* is therefore more somber than in *La boda*, as Elizabeth's outdrawn struggle in *Escuela* to legalize her husband's *status* and find decent housing and work for both of them underpins Liliana's day-to-day reality and foreshadows her own bleak prospects.

La boda begins by setting a distinctly ambiguous, neither-here-nor-there tone that is carried through in both films. For an

uncomfortably long while, Weyer focuses only the actions of her cast, not on their words. For as long as possible, she delays the moment her characters speak and give away their identities, implying from the get-go that language and identity will be inextricably intertwined in her storyworld – another theme that is continued in both documentaries. Having unarmed her audience in these first few moments by withholding a clear plotline or focal character, Weyer then unleashes a sensory overload of sounds and images meant to confuse and disorientate her viewers, tempting them to look for contextual clues in this sea of conflicting signals. The first images of *La boda* are almost voyeuristic (00:02:20-00:05:50). As the captions announce it is 4.30 am in a migrant labor camp in Shafter, California, the camera mimics the shaky movements of a peeping tom lurking from behind the bushes, eyeing a one-story house that seems to glow in the dark, its indoor lights beaming through the windows. Still hiding outside, the lens catches a glimpse of a middle-aged woman, slowly turning on her feet – the only inhabitant of the house who seems to be awake at such an ungodly hour. The camera then cuts to the woman's hands and hovers above them as they swiftly turn around tortilla after tortilla on a scorching hot griddle. Again, the camera abruptly cuts to the other members of this sleepy household: it appears the woman is not alone. Now filling the tortillas with a nondescript mixture, the woman is left alone in the kitchen as the camera goes on an exploration tour of the tiny house. An older man is struggling with his wristwatch in one corner. In another, a young woman is getting dressed, while a second is still fast asleep on a bunkbed somewhere. Back in the kitchen, a young man is filling an ice box with ice cubes, as he and the now fully clothed woman tiptoe around a third sleeping girl, whose bed is placed in the middle of a room used as a kitchen, a bedroom, a dining room, and a living room all at once. With the car radio on full blast, the groggy group hops into a large van and starts driving into the sunrise. Even though the radio host can be heard reading the weather forecast in Mexican Spanish, the van appears to be driving on a US highway, following an all-American,

green signpost that reads "County Line Road". On arrival, with traditional Mexican music still blaring in the background, the passengers descend, put on hats and gloves, swaddle their faces in colorful neckerchiefs, and walk out into miles and miles of grape vines, which they nimbly begin picking. Suddenly, everything turns dark. With the title "La Boda (The Wedding)" popping out of the black screen in white font, Weyer makes the surprise announcement that this film will be about something quite different from what has been shown so far. Or will it?

In the introductory sequence of *Escuela* (00:00:07-00:02:16), Weyer is more direct in evoking the bilingual and bicultural limbo that has become standard living for the Luis family. Sitting in an empty row at the back of a yellow, typically North American school bus, Lili drives by the camera, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings. In the meantime, her family is shown at home, frantically packing, folding, stacking all kinds of clothes, small furniture, lightweight items. The Luises are on the move – again. This time around, from the very beginning of the film, the cast is not only heard talking to themselves – in Spanish when it comes to the parents and in Spanglish or English when it comes to the children – but also to the camera. As in *La boda*, Weyer's audiovisual juxtapositions summon a sense of vacillation and equivocation. By having Lili's peaceful school bus scene clash with the family's hustle and bustle, Weyer seems to suggest that, despite their attempts at a sedentary lifestyle, the Luises are moored in a mental and physical no man's land whose territory is perpetually shifting. Their home has no anchor point. In the first few minutes of *Escuela*, reading between the lines of mother Juanita's short interaction with Weyer, it becomes clear she is very much aware of how her nomadic existence ties in with her migrant identity. As uncomfortable as it may be, migrancy is the Luises' baseline and their lifeline, but one they would happily swap for something more secure and stable. This unease with their hybridity – and the limitations it imposes on them – Juanita describes to the camera as follows, still tirelessly sorting through clothes:

> Every year it's the same thing. Every year we have to pack our bags because I can't get work just anywhere here in Texas because I don't know English. I need to speak English for them to give me work. That's why I need to go to California to do field work. Over there, in the cotton fields, in the grapes... I have to work where I can. It's a compromise we have to make to live better. [...] I say to my kids – I want them to stick with school so they don't end up like me. If I had an education, I would stay right here. (00:00:44-00:01:31; original English subtitles).

In *La boda*, her daughter Elizabeth and her husband Eliazar make a similar allusion to how the family's migrant background forces them into permanent migration – a way of life that is so precarious and undesirable that it is usually associated with undocumented Mexicans, as Elizabeth implies:

> [Elizabeth] If I was to go up to someone and say "You know what? I'm a migrant," well, they might say "She must come from Mexico and she doesn't have papers." Coz I have bumped with people like that. For me being a migrant is going to California to go work for six months, coming to Texas, and live on a small budget. That most people don't know, you know. In Mission, Texas it's hard to find a job, so I think that most of the families... that they have to go work up North, in different places. Nebraska, North Dakota, California. To have a good job. [Eliazar] Me and Juanita get married in 1967 but from this... when... as soon as I first start working, when I married Juanita, Juanita do the same thing. In other words, both work in the same time. We been working for all the life. We had to go every year in April to California, 1800 miles away from here. We been sometimes in Fresno, California. Corrales, California. Macfarlane. I go work in one place, Juanita go work in different place, but in the field. But this is the way I don't have... the way I never have a problem, you know,

> to support my family because Juanita been help me out... help me a lot, you know, working and try and safe money. (00:08:08-00:10:01)

Put together, Elizabeth's irritation with people who assume she is not American, Eliazar's concern with making enough money to support his wife and children, and Juanita's lamentation about her lack of English proficiency testify of the Luises' unconscious incorporation of the age-old "one country, one language"-adage upon which the United States of America were built (*cf.* Adams; Franklin).

According to Alejandro Portes and Richard Shauffler, this notion began gaining ground in the colonial and early independence period when, on the one hand, growing American nationalism popularized the idea that "American English both reflected and constituted the democratic and rational nature of the country" and, on the other, when the acquisition of English began to be seen as "the litmus test of citizenship" (642). In *The Invention of Monolingualism*, David Gramling further delves into the artificiality of monolingualism by pointing out its suspicious coincidence, worldwide, with the emergence of nations, national borders, and nationalism (Gramling). As Dennis Baron explains in his seminal book *The English-only Question*, the use and knowledge of English became an essential part of Americanism because it went hand in hand with the idea that a melting-pot nation like America could only truly come together and become one if a single language was used consistently throughout the land (Baron). That language had to be English, since "the ability to think logically, seen as necessary for democracy, was only possible on the basis of fluency in English" (Portes; Schauffler 642). Slowly but surely, the American expectation of English-only monolingualism began seeping into classrooms. In the first half of the 20th century, bilingualism was not only frowned upon, in the best cases, or banned entirely, in the worst, but in certain areas school children – those considered to be at risk of acquiring another mother tongue than English – were even made to take language loyalty oaths (Dillard). Starting

from the sixties, however, a plethora of studies began disproving the folkloric assumption that bilingualism went hand in hand with intellectual failure by linking "true bilinguals" with enhanced cognitive abilities (*e.g.* Caplan *et al.*; Fernandez, Nielsen; Lambert, Tucker; Peal, Lambert). However, the USA were slow to recognize the benefits of multilingualism, mainly because of their tendency to equate monolingualism with democracy, national unity, and allegiance to the country – in schools and in public life (Portes, Schauffler 642; *cf.* Dick; Gramling).

As Lieberson, Dalto, and Johnston remarked in the mid-seventies, America was quite unique in its linguistic intrusion in private homes: no other nation was so successful and consistent in eradicating mother tongues that were perceived to be non-native by the third generation (Lieberson *et al.*). That, however, would soon change. Around the time of Eliazar and Juanita's marriage and cross-over to the United States, in the mid-sixties, the nature and the reception of incoming immigrants rapidly started altering, which would have a dramatic impact on the language skills and ethnic-racial identity of their offspring (Christophe *et al.*; Portes, Zhou). The immigrants who began arriving from the sixties onwards were mostly non-European, came from divergent socio-economic backgrounds, and settled in large enclaves, geographically concentrating in the West of the United States (Portes; Rumbaut; Zhou (a)). Additionally, the economic conditions encountered by these new migrants were nothing like what their European predecessor had known. Because of America's emerging hourglass economy – in which opportunities for social mobility have been consistently shrinking even among native-born Americans – and due to a welfare state that is increasingly being contested by the general public, the adaption of these newcomers and their children became much more troublesome than that of previous arrivals (Zhou (a), 67). In that sense, the Luis family is a textbook example of this negative socio-economic phenomenon. Trying their best to adapt to a nation that abounds with subliminal messages relating the American dream to monolingual and monocultural integration, the family is very much

aware of their failure to achieve "straight-line assimilation," which promises to "enable each succeeding generation to show upward social mobility in education and occupation" (Waters *et al*. 1169; *cf*. Park, Burgess; Warner, Srole).

In their interviews with Weyer, the Luises explain that they learned the hard way that working in the fields does not pay off. As we learn in *Escuela*, Eliazar and Juanita were so worried they would not be able to make ends meet on two wages alone, that they felt they had no other choice but to pull their oldest children from school after 8th grade. Elizabeth, Eliazar and Alma, one of his older daughters, confess:

> [Elizabeth] When my older sisters they were growing up, when they dropped out of school, they didn't thought nothing wrong of it, because from the year before... you know, that's basically what was going on with all the migrant families. [Alma] The oldest kids were working, all year round practically. You know, got their work permit, were out working. And uhm... that's pretty much what happened to me. I didn't decide to drop out of school. I finished 8th grade, had the graduation, and went back to work, like, the next day. [Eliazar] As soon as like Aleida, Alma, Lorena, they graduation from 8th grade, I had to take them out of school so they can help me. But then, in that time I had a different thinking, you know. I've been thinking that I'mma better put 'em to work, make some money, save it but I were wrong that time. Like, right now, I have a different thinking. It's more better send the kids to school. All the way. That way they can be prepared to find a better work, not in the field. (00:04:17-00:05:37)

The camera then turns to Lili, who announces that she is nervous and curious about entering 9th grade (00:05:40-00:06:10). Her young enthusiasm is palpable and contagious: for a short while, the optimism that characterized a large part of *La boda*

appears to sneak into *Escuela*. However, by interweaving Lili's teenage life with short segments of Elizabeth's adult worries post-*La boda*, Weyer subtly raises the question whether Liliana's future really will be all that better, now that she's been given the opportunity to finish high school. After all, her older sister Elizabeth did too but when her steady job at a bra factory in Mission, Texas falls through, she and her new husband – who is still trying to legalize his *status* (00:33:15) – are forced to migrate yet again with her parents (00:42:50). It would seem that for these non-European immigrants, who already belonged to the lower socioeconomic classes of their sending country, and who end up settling in ethnic enclaves in the receiving country, education and English proficiency is no guarantee for upward mobility after all (*cf*. Portes; Portes, Zhou; Zhou, Gonzales).

Adolescence and Assimilation

From the 1960s on, the classical assimilation perspective upon which America's belief in the "one language, one culture"-axiom was based suddenly did not add up anymore. As Zhou explains:

> In the literature on immigrant adaptation, the assimilation perspective has dominated much of the sociological thinking on the subject for the larger part of [the 20th] century. Central to this perspective are the assumptions that there is a natural process by which diverse ethnic groups come to share a common culture and to gain equal access to the opportunity structure of society; that this process consists of gradually deserting old cultural and behavioral patterns in favor of new ones; and that, once set in motion, this process moves inevitably and irreversibly toward assimilation. Classical assimilationists argue that migration leads to a situation of the "marginal man," in which immigrants are pulled in the direction of the host culture but drawn back by the culture of their origin (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1937). This painful

> bipolar process, as Park sees it, entails a natural race relations cycle of contact, competition, accommodation (Park, 1928). Impacted by biotic forces (impersonal competition) and social forces (communication and cooperation), diverse immigrant groups from underprivileged backgrounds are expected to eventually abandon their old ways of life and completely "melt" into the mainstream through residential integration and occupational achievement in a sequence of succeeding generations. (Zhou (b), 976)

Curiously, the word choice and overall discourse used by the theoreticians mentioned here above is quite reminiscent of the kind of language that is often applied to refer to adolescence. Famously described by James Marcia as "identity synthesis" (Marcia, (a), (b)), adolescence is usually defined as the internal organization of certain drives, abilities, beliefs that are acquired by exploring a variety of options and committing to only a number of them (Bosma, Kunnen; Schwartz *et al.*). Simplistically put, adulthood is psychologically perceived as the consistent reliance on a set number of drives, abilities and beliefs that remain after the elimination of a wide range of other choices during the transitional, experimental stage of adolescence – a phase during which certain behavioral and identitarian options (that are all hypothetically available during childhood) are considered, explored, and either discarded or maintained (*cf.* Bogaerts *et al.*). Similarly, according to classical assimilationists, distinctive ethnic traits (*e.g.* culture, language, geographical concentration) are perceived as sources of disadvantage that have to be eliminated for the attainment of sane, fully-fledged assimilation (Child; Warner, Srole; Wirth). Their straight-line assimilation theory anticipated that in the process of assimilating – which, in this context, almost appears synonymous to the process of reaching adulthood – most ethnic groups would lose all their distinctive characteristics and cease to exist as ethnic groups (Gordon). As Zhou explains, immigrants were expected to "free themselves from their old cultures in order to begin rising

up from marginal positions" – a path similar to the coming-of-age process of adolescence (Zhou (b), 977).

Interestingly, Zhou notes an oppositional culture among young Americans, especially among those who have felt oppressed and excluded from the American mainstream and who have been frustrated by the widening gap between a culture that highly values freedom and materialism and the reality of a dwindling economic future (Zhou (a), 69). The Luis sisters can easily be classified as belonging to that demographic, going by their portrayal in Weyer's documentary tandem at least. Going against Gordon's prediction that every immigrant generation is destined to assimilate through, among other things, intermarriage with the majority population (Gordon), Elizabeth confirms in a dual interview with Artemio that she knew he was the one when he told her he was from Nuevo León, the Mexican home state of her parents. To him, however, origin did not matter:

> [Elizabeth] As soon as I found out he was from Chivo Leon, I was like, 'Sit down!'
> [Artemio] I sat down and from that moment I didn't let go. I got to know her and we started to go out. And thanks to God…
> [Elizabeth] But was it important for you…?
> [Artemio] Yeah.
> [Elizabeth] …That we were both from Nuevo Leon?
> [Artemio] No, not really. For me it'd be fine to meet a woman from another place as long as she understood me. (00:33:52-00:34:21; original English subtitles)

Their interaction confirms previous studies, in which European Americans are less likely to identify as American compared to their ethnic-minority peers. According to Rodriguez *et al*., they identify as White instead of identifying with a particular ethnic group and/or being American, because they see themselves as the norm (Rodriguez *et al*. 830). In a Mexican context, Artemio has

probably never consciously given his ethnic-racial identity a second thought, therefore background and self-labeling matters much less to him than it does to Elizabeth, whose entire life is built around the ambiguity of who she is.

Her little sister Lili testifies in *Escuela* of the same need to construct a hyphenated identity that allows her to "maintain self-esteem" by valuing her Mexicanness "in resistance to the dominant majority white society" (Zhou (a), 69–70). Eating a hotdog in the back of a car, playfully joking around with her younger sister Yesenia and her cousin Janet, fourteen-year-old Lili declares:

> [Liliana] Well, last year I used to listen to English music, like I listen to now. Coz it's more moving, I like what they say. It's kinda cool coz I could dance to it. I have a rhythm to it, I have everything to it. And this year I changed like a little bit of my style to salsa, coz I could move more to it. I could move my *caderas* more to it. [...]
> [Hanna Weyer] So if you had a choice and there was a fine White boy and a fine Mexican boy, who would you date? Who would you want to go out with?
> [Yesenia] Oh my gosh.
> [Janet] The White boy!
> [Liliana] No! The Mexican!
> [Janet] It depends which one should treat you better, I think.
> [Liliana] The Mexican! The Mexican!
> [Janet] Well, how do you know? I mean, actually...
> [Liliana] Well, ok, why. The White boy... He just goes for your...
> [Janet] How do you know?
> [Liliana] This is how it goes... This is how it goes! He is usually trippin' over you, just going for your looks, or he just wants to scam with you. The Mexican knows how to treat a girl. Alright? Alright. The Mexican has dignity to say the truth, not like the White guy. He could cheat on you. He could cheat on you like three or four times.
> [Janet] So you're saying all White guys are alike?
> [Liliana] Yeah.

> [Yesenia] No, they're not all alike.
> [Liliana] What are all guys?
> [Yesenia] They're guys!
> [Liliana] Guys are doooogs. Woof! Woof! (00:11:47-00:13:46)

What in another instance could have passed for harmless teenage banter, becomes quite a grave matter in Weyer's film. Conscious of their less than desirable social standing in American society, tempted to what Zhou refers to as "acting white" (Zhou (a), 69) by listening to English music, in Lili's case, or by playing with the idea of taking birth control in Elizabeth's (*La boda* 00:23:00), and vaguely aware of their inescapable marginality in a cultural context that equals Whiteness with Americanness (*cf.* Devos, Mohamed; West *et al.*) the Luis sisters refuse to accept the American "one language, one culture" ideal. They proudly proclaim their preference for Mexican love interests and insist on speaking Spanglish or Spanish with their Mexican-American friends and family. Their adolescence might be a matter of leaving unconstructive behaviors and beliefs behind, but their assimilation is not. The insidious parallel established by the "one culture, one language" credo between adolescence and assimilation does not hold up for Weyer's protagonists. They refuse to participate in an assimilation that is a "zero-sum experience in which one must lose one cultural identity to identify with another cultural group" (West *et al*. 965). Their individuation process is transformative and dynamic because it results "not only from the direct influences of each of their cultures but also from the processes they use to negotiate their cultures" (West *et al*. 967).

According to Portes and Zhou (1993) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001), the second generation of the post-1960s immigration wave – to which Lili and Elizabeth belong – tends to acculturate selectively. In less than favorable receptive circumstances, these newer immigrants hold on to their ethnic networks and identities in order

to establish a certain amount of social capital and group solidarity in an otherwise quite hostile societal environment (Zhou (b)). This so-called segmented assimilation theory, coined by Portes and Zhou in their seminal paper "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants" (1993), nuances the harshness of Perlmann and Waldinger's (1997) "second generation revolt" or Gans's (1992) "second generation decline" according to which the children of the newer wave of immigrants "will either not be asked, or will be reluctant, to work at immigrant wages and hours as their parents did but will lack job opportunities, skills and connections to do better" (Gans 173–174). The Luises's segmented assimilation, however, is one that they do not perceive as a failure. In *La boda*, Juanity explains their unity – be it within their family or within their ethnic Mexican enclaves in Texas and California – as a necessity and a welcome relief in the face of relentless adversity:

> From the moment I married, I began to work. Constant work in California. And then I got pregnant and I worked and worked. I didn't stop working. Because I had to help my husband with the obligation that a marriage carries. But at the same time, I don't mind because I have a wonderful family. And maybe... Slowly but surely... I'm not saying that we're educated really well – no. Because we're not perfect. But we're trying... not to go astray, [the kids are always] trying always to do what we say. You talk with your children and you tell them, we all have to struggle together. We have to teach them how one should live. (00:50:34-00:51:38; original English subtitles)

Aware that her family is far from attaining the ideal straight-line assimilation so emphatically advertised in American society as a *sine qua non*, Juanita is nevertheless unrepentant. Within their means, they have achieved as much as they possibly could. Their receiving country might never fully accept them as one of theirs, but as long as the Luises can create and sustain a sense of belonging

to each other, they will continue to feed off of that nurturing and self-sustained, albeit marginalizing, Mexican-American social capital to keep fighting for a better life – if not for themselves and their children, then for their grandchildren and their children.

A Barbaric Conclusion

Hannay Weyer's documentary tandem on the adolescence and assimilation of two Mexican-American migrant sisters is a timely portrayal of the struggle of an important portion of America's contemporary society: non-European immigrants who try to make a living in a country that has become all too willing to associate them with barbaric invaders (Buchanan; Haynes; Huntington; Nail). In *La Boda* and *Escuela*, Weyer gives the floor to two adolescent representatives of this barbaric, bilingual, bicultural tribe. Liliana and Elizabeth's reality – or the glimpses of their day-to-day that are supposed to give Weyer's audience a general (perhaps even a generalizing) idea of their reality – is one that does not strike with the invasion myth. However, Weyer turns the tables and plays with the victim-perpetrator paradigm (*cf.* Rothberg). With the help of evocative images, heartfelt interviews, and clever editing, she conveys a sense of awareness within the Luis family that America's political discourse, popular media, and even its legal – supposedly unbiased – bodies are particularly antagonistic towards Mexican immigrants and abound with analogies between them and their barbaric (racial, linguistic, geographic) inferiority (Nail 229). The Luises remain undeterred and undefeated, despite it all. Their family is their fortress and their assimilation into American society happens on their own terms, in their own time – not out of stubbornness, unwillingness or incapability but out of a pragmatism imposed on them by the dire socioeconomic circumstances of their reception.

Weyer never romanticizes the Luises hybrid existence, however. In that, she follows a growing trend within Latinx Studies that steps away from presenting liminality as a desirable state

of mind and a celebratory expression of self-acceptance. Pablo Vila, for example, hammers on how stressful border existences can be and points out that this fact is entirely overlooked in the works of Gloria Anzaldúa or Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2003). Angharad Valdivia admonishes that, far too often, hybridity is simplistically interpreted as a playful space, conveniently stripped of its marginalizing character and its terrifying capability to both deconstruct and reconstruct racism (Valdivia). Shane Moreman softens the Latinx concept of hybridity by appealing to Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha's resignification process, which is "probably the best way to think through and out of oppressive meanings and their power constructs" (Moreman (b), 104).

Because of this need to resignify her liminal sense of self, in the final scenes of *Escuela*, Liliana recreates her hybrid, fractured, marginalizing identity on the outside by adjusting her appearance and donning goth outfits:

> [Liliana] *Si Dios quiere*, I'm gonna do my hair all blonde. Every single inch of my hair is gonna be blonde with red or black streaks. Or black hair, all my hair black, with blue or red streaks.
> [Hannah Weyer] And why did you… How did you come up with the idea?
> [Liliana] I came up with the idea coz I wanna become a civilized freak. They're giving like this big clue that I'm a freak, just because of my make-up and my skull but I don't care what they think. At least I know that I'm a smart, integ… intennigen… person! (00:41:04)

Who are "they"? Is Liliana truly referring to her high school peers? Or is she – consciously or unconsciously – provoking the world at large? A world that cornered her – and her family – into an awkward state of inbetweenness. A state she has to revendicate in order to not succumb to the shame that accompanies such marginalizing existence. That being said, Lili resists all clichés associated with

Mexican youths and chooses for black clothes, dark make-up and a skull-necklace. Her look and her attitude are telling of her cynicism towards those who mock her, as well as of her unwillingness to be swallowed up by a bulldozing, homogenizing cultural matrix – be that high school, or American society. Elizabeth and Liliana are the epitome of Perlmann and Waldinger's (1997) "second generation revolt" rather than Gans's (1992) "second generation decline" in that their refusal to metaphorically drop their hyphen (Portes, Schauffler 641) is more of an act of conscious defiance and resistance than it is the consequence of their supposed helplessness and defeat in a society that only applauds straight-line assimilation.

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