

The “New Identity” of the Immigrants in the United States: A study of Two Poems

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Abstract

The United States of America has long been the land of hopes and dreams. People poured into the country for a better life. The (‘native’) people of the country have campaigned that everybody is welcome to live and become the citizens there; they also claim that they respect and appreciate human right and do not discriminate people. The two poems analyzed here describe the efforts and struggles of immigrants who came to the United States and tried to become her citizens, a thing that ‘in reality’ is very difficult and full of obstacles. Those newcomers were hampered by many things, both from the things outside and inside them. Immigrants who now live in USA write the two poems and they are interesting to be analyzed, as they picture experiences and struggles of migrants living in a new country

Keywords: *Immigrants, identity, natives, assimilation, adaptation, American values, American Dreams, confusion, discrimination, to position, to be positioned.*

America, ‘the new world’, has long been a land of dream and hope for many people. Since a long time ago people from all over the globe came there in the hope for a better life. Since the land was quite ‘new’, she still had much ‘empty’ space waiting to be occupied by human, as stated by Mann (in Luedke, 1998, p. 71). America’s vast expanse of land was under populated; her boundless resources were unexploited. She still offered many opportunities; she was a sweet honey-inviting bee. For the country to build and develop, she needed more people, therefore the government passed Act 1802, which invited people to come there and become citizens.

Due to that condition, many immigrants came to the US, a fact that was encouraged by the government. This results in the mixture of blood of the people, which are now known as Americans, as Creve Coeur (in Mann) described it as “a strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country”. While the Indians as the natives of the continent have become “extinct” and they have been replaced by people from Europe (especially Britain) who now considered themselves as the natives. They called themselves Americans. I think this is what Stuart Hall meant in his essay about identity “[we] all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, positioned” (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994, p. 392).

Now that they settled in the new country, these people thought and felt that they were the real American people with the American ‘values, quality and dream’ that differed them from others and I think those ‘identities’ also made them feel more superior than others who are not Americans. Their place (i.e. America, by which I mean The United States) has become the context enabling them to tell other people that they were ‘rooted’ in that country, in spite of the fact that they did come from other countries.



And once they settled there they 'ignored' their origins. (For practicality, I would use the word America to refer to The United States in my following elaboration).

These 'Americans' set their new 'values' (for example; egalitarianism, democracy, liberalism, and hard work), created a new image of a place that 'welcomed' everybody from different nationalities to 'melt' together in the new country (as a melting pot) and 'invented' a big hope for everybody to cling to in order to be the best and to get the most fortune they could possibly collect (American dream). But this American dream does not tolerate any weak people; competition is very tough and only the 'strong' could survive. The losers would have to make way for others to move on.

This was the condition that inspired others to come and try to get their luck in America. But the new comers didn't find it that easy for them to come, settle and work there. They faced a lot of problems, either caused by the 'native' Americans or by themselves, such as their 'inner struggle' when they had to change their 'old identity' with the 'new one' as a consequence of leaving their home country behind to live in a new place. I think for one thing it is not easy to dismantle one's identity and change it with a new one. Another thing is that it was not easy either for them to get acceptance from the 'Americans' there, for people tend to have prejudice toward something new / strange. Moreover when it is related to the competition to survive and to earn a good living, the more people the tougher the competition is. One other thing is when the new comers have a different 'look'; it will be another hindrance for them to get a good welcome. Finally, the case of discrimination is inevitable, especially toward the black people.

The efforts of those immigrants to be Americans, to be accepted there and their continuous struggle are not something new, yet it is always interesting to watch and learn from it. The two poems I am going to discuss here take a close look at those points, they want to tell us about the never-ending process of getting an identity, for "identity is a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (ibid.).

The two poems will show us that it was not easy for the immigrants to be both themselves or to change. And those two poems are 'very meaningful' as well as interesting for they were written by two people of different backgrounds; the first one is written by an immigrant born in her own country (Puerto Rico) who later moved to America, the second was written by a white-'native' American who was born in Washington DC, but both have some sympathy toward the suffering of the immigrants coming to the USA.

Child of the Americas

A Puerto Rican who was born in her own country but later moved to USA with her family writes this poem in the year of 1986. So if we see from the year it was written, the 'experience' that happened to her was not too long ago. Her poem envisaged the 'confusion' and the nervousness of a Puerto Rican living in the new country called America at present time. The poem focuses on the problem faced by many immigrants who left their countries of origins and felt displaced. To live in this new country they were expected to have a new identity, but it was not such an easy thing. As the result they felt that they had 'blurred' identity; they were not Americans but they were not as they were before (like in their countries) either.

The title 'Child of the Americas' suggests the confusion I mentioned above. The 'speaker' wants to tell us that *she* (though actually the speaker can be either *he* or *she*) has become a manifestation of the assimilation of so many origins that have become one in the US. And as the result of such combination she has so many 'elements' of identity in her.

She could join any group of origin, but at the same time she might not belong to any of them. So she is a kind of having 'double' identities that instead of helping her find herself, it makes her unsure of herself.

The form of the poem doesn't follow a certain pattern, in which we can find some stanzas with two lines (*couplets*), three lines (*tercets*), and one stanza with four lines (*quatrain*) exist together. Most likely it has something to do with the message it wants to convey; the mixture of people that caused mixture of identities. It is as if the poem wants to tell us that life itself is full of variations and different 'ingredients'. That is why the stanzas were not composed in a 'monotonous' way, because there is no such thing as singularity in life.

And still related to the structure of the stanzas, the rhyme is not in the 'same' pattern. In fact those stanzas do not have rhyme, because I think the beauty of this poem comes as a secondary consideration. The 'spotlight' is more to the message it carries, and it is also to support the **tone** of the poem; **confusion** about one's 'place' in a society. And to make the message clearer / stronger I think it is better that way.

The diction is of the informal, she uses the words we can hear in our daily life; words we are familiar with. And again I believe it has a relation with the theme of the poem, which will be different if it was about, say, love or contemplation of her life. Rather in this poem she makes a 'statement' about herself and people 'like her' (people who share the same problem with her). She wants to speak out to people so that they would know and be aware of that condition. She wants to point out something that –possibly- have been taken for granted by many people. That is why she uses a lot of words that show or have something to do with the origins of those people, such as: Caribbean, Puerto Rican, Latin-American, African, European and Spanish. I think she tried to make the readers think about their existence; that they did not suddenly be 'Americans', but it took them quite some effort and caused them some suffering before they could be the 'Americans' that we see they are nowadays.

About the tone, there are many words showing the uncertainty that the speaker feels. She talks about someone who was *born into the continent at a crossroad*, and she mentions that crossroad twice: to emphasize her hesitation. In the sixth stanza it is clear that many people do not feel at home and do not really know where to turn to when they need a homeland as their root or origin.

I am not African. Africa is in me, but I cannot return.

I am not taina, Taino is in me, but there is no way back.

I am not european, Europe lives in me but I have no home there.

Besides that stanza, she also shows the confusion by the two lines in the second stanza; "a product of the ghettos of New York I have never known". She feels that she is like what she is now because of her 'experience' in the slum of the big city called New York, and she never knew such treatment before. And as it is her first time facing such condition she is not ready for that and that makes her feel awkward.

In the first stanza the speaker has already shown us a condition, which is not comfortable for her. She feels that she is a result of a combination of many 'races'. She has the Caribbean blood, but the color of her skin is not dark to make her belong to the Caribbeans, at the same time she is not white either to make her 'suitable' to join the



white Americans. She has become the young generation of the Americans that came from a mixture of many origins; this condition makes her think about so many countries as her homeland. But the 'many bloods' in her also cause her some problems; she cannot make up her mind of where to go, I mean she is not sure which nationality she has to choose as her identity; she has a 'blurred' identity. I think she has become a symbol of the many nationalities that were thrown away from their countries and therefore they came to America as the land of hope. Her skin color is similar to the 'native white Americans, but similar does not mean the same, and that difference is the beginning of her confusion of how to handle the situation.

I am a child of the Americas
a light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean
a child of many diasporas, born into this continent at a crossroad.

America, however, was not friendly toward the immigrants who in fact were the minority, so the immigrants became the victims of the big city. This community was marginalized and discriminated; life for them was more difficult than for the Americans themselves. I believe the priority for job opportunities would be given to the Americans first, so were other chances (for example: education, health and welfare charity from government) to better their life. And to make things worse was when someone was a Jew. The stigma that Jews were always victimized did not go off easily, so the suffering was double for this kind of immigrant. It was also possible that this person was treated as an outcast by the people around him / her.

I am a U.S. Puerto Rican Jew
a product of the ghettos of New York I have never known.

So even though she feels that she has become one of the Americans, maybe because she was already born in the US (*a U.S. Puerto Rican Jew*) the resistance from the 'local' community is still there. The point is she is still different from the Americans, that's why she gets a bad treatment or a difficult life as reflected from the word ghetto. And this becomes her new experience because she does not have it in her own country.

The third stanza, "An immigrant and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants. /I speak English with passion: it's the tongue of my consciousness, /a flashing knife blade of crystal, my tool, my craft" is, I believe, to say that actually once a person is an immigrant s/he will always be an immigrant deep in their soul, regardless of the adaptation or assimilation that has already taken place. So what applicable here is the identity as an immigrant, they would 'never' be (like) the natives of the U.S. Circumstances might force them to behave like the natives, that is why they have to be able to speak the language that the natives speak; English especially, if they want to get 'descent' jobs. Without the mastery of English (as one of the identities of the white) the immigrants would not be able to get good jobs. Most likely / typically, these immigrants would get low pay and 'dirty' jobs, such as cleaning service people, garbage collector, etc. She speaks English but she uses it only as a tool to get a good job that would enable her to have a better life and a better 'status'. English has become one of the identities of the white. The white are fascinating, as beautiful and expensive crystals that lure people to have the same status as them. So English here functions as a tool to make a good living to achieve the American dream and it also functions as an identity of educated people. But still deep in their heart, these immigrants keep thinking and longing for their homeland "I speak English with passion: it's the tongue of my consciousness". They are aware of their need of speaking English for those reasons, they 'adore' the language, but that does not mean they forget their root, their culture and their 'original' identity. From this point we can see the hypocrisy of the people of this big country that actually

the so-called assimilation is just a label, but in reality it does not work that way. We can also see how language becomes a tool to repress the minority group and how this minority must master the language if they want to 'survive'. And on the contrary we too can find 'hypocrisy' of the minority; they speak English as if they were already the people of America, but in this poem it is utilized just as a cover of her subconscious that always wants to 'go back home'.

She talks further about her root and origin in the fourth stanza:

I am Caribena, island grown. Spanish is in my flesh,
ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hip:
the language of garlic and mangoes,
the singing in my poetry, the flying gestures of my hands.

She tells us about her 'original' identity and we can feel her deep love toward her homeland, Spain. It has really become one with her; it is in her blood, the way she behaves and things that she does still reflect that even though she has become the citizen of a new country called America. To her Spain is better / more 'refined' than America, in the way of the richness of the culture and the 'quality' of the women. When she says about *the language of garlic and mangoes*, I think she wants to say that America was 'tasteless' and has no sense of art / beauty compared to her country. America is plain and not a 'fertile' land. While Spain is described to be more colorful, has more 'taste' and class; it has various sources of nature. Spain has the beauty and grace; her women are beautiful and attractive "Spanish is in my flesh, ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hips".

In the fifth stanza again she mentions about her 'true' identity; she wants to emphasize what she has already stated before (stanza 6) "I am of Latino America, rooted in the history of my continent :/ I speak from that body". She considers her being a Latin American woman as the root of her existence, so even though she does not live in her own country she is sure she still belongs there, even though she only knows her country of origin from stories, she has a strong bond with her. Not being there physically does not make her 'leave' her homeland.

This 'problem' or condition does not happen only to her. She is the representative of the voice of other immigrants coming from other countries. She shares the same concern with those other groups "I am not african. Africa is in me, but I cannot return. /I am not taina, Taino is in me, but there is no way back. /I am not european, Europe lives in me, but I have no home there. /" This is a common problem for all immigrants to America.

These people who have left their homeland do not have the 'ability' to totally leave and forget their roots. In the new place they still remember the old place; the memories still haunt them. So they 'float'; they have no root in the old place, or in the new place. Halls shows that "[identities] are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and positioned within, the narratives of the past" (in Williams and Chrisman, 1994, p. 394). These immigrants who came and now settled in America do not get proper acceptance from the 'Americans' so that they do not feel at home there.

Hall also tells how the past influences the people strongly. He says that the past can have a very powerful effect to the construction of one's identity in the present time.

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. . . . It is not a fixed origin that to which we can make some final and absolute return. . . . It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (Ibid, p. 395).



I think the speaker is trying to say that these people face some difficulty in positioning themselves, for returning back to their original countries is not possible for one reason or another. They would most probably face some unfamiliarity in their old homeland if they go back there, for they have been influenced by the circumstances of the country where they are now (America). The condition would surely be different between the two places and the different range of time would cause some changes. I think this is also the case that is said by Hall:

Difference persists – in and alongside continuity. To return to the Caribbean after a long absence is to experience again the shock of the 'doubleness' of the similarity and difference. And this difference was no mere of topography or climate. It is a profound difference of culture and history (Ibid, p. 396).

It is not easy to 'go back to the past' again, especially if they have experienced the 'better' and 'more modern' life in the U.S.A. Perhaps it is like a kind of culture shock that one might have when they come to a new place that has a different culture.

One more thing to say is the small letters the writer uses when she wrote *african*, *taina*, and *european*; she wants to say that the identity at present is not a 'big deal', but those from the past are more important and more influencing; what marks them now comes from their past. And in the last stanza, "I am new. History made me. My first language was spanglish/ I was born at the crossroads/ and I am whole," means that she feels that her complete self is what she is now, a mixture of her origin and her new country. Though her homeland is just a history that will always be a 'question' to her (because she no longer knows it well) but she will always keep it in her. And the condition that she always feels that she is at a crossroad has become a 'new identity' for her. So the search will not end here, but she will have to be contented for what she is now, at least for the time being "identity is a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Ibid, p. 396).

Melting Pot

This second poem contains a message similar to the first one, the problem of identity of the immigrants. But the way of telling is different. Melting Pot says it cynically and also talks about the discrimination experienced by those immigrants. The emphasis is more on the tone, while the first poem is more 'concerned' with the message. Another difference between the two is; the first poem is told by someone who is 'involved' since she experienced it herself, while the second poem is told by an 'observer or outsider' who is not.

The writer sounds like a 'real' American, not an immigrant himself. Unfortunately, I do not have enough information about him. He might be a black-skinned American (the younger generation of the immigrants coming from Africa long long time ago) or a white American that deeply sympathizes the black and other different colored immigrants. The way he writes the form of the poem is different too; this one is a bit more 'obedient' to the 'standardized pattern' of writing a poem. Each of the stanzas consists of four lines (**quatrain**), except the third and the fourth, which are **couplets**, and they have rhymes at the end of several lines. And for the writer this rhyming sound is necessary, that is why in the first stanza he writes " girl or man", which is unusual as usually it is girl and boy, or woman and man, to make it rhyme with the word "American". Maybe

the rhyme is needed to support the cynical tone the poem implies; saying something painful in a beautiful way, such as in the first stanza: "There is a magic melting pot/ where any girl or man/ can step in Czech or Greek or Scot, / step out American."

The speaker begins his poem with a cynical tone to describe America. He calls it a magic melting pot. America –naturally- consists of people from many different nationalities that melt into one new nation that is why many people use the term melting pot. In my perception (after reading the whole poem), he does not mean to praise it by saying 'magic ' but rather to insinuate the country that forces the immigrants to leave their identities behind and change it with something new that is more suitable to use; something more 'American". We can see it further when we connect the first stanza with the second one, where people have to change their name and even their faith in order to be American. It is called magic because this pot welcomes anybody into it as long as they would follow 'the rules'. Or we could also say that anybody that enters this magic pot would 'automatically' be changed into someone new (possessing new identity tags). So the change could happen either consciously or unconsciously. And the acceptable tag is 'WASP' (White – Anglo Saxon – Protestant), as told in the next stanza:

Johann and Jan and Jean and Juan,
Giovanni and Ivan
Step in and step out again
All freshly christened John.

America is a place that filters and changes the varieties into singularity in term of identity. It is similar to the first poem (Child of America) when the woman described her country of origin as something more colorful (stanza 4) while America is plainer, and more 'dull' because of this singularity. Here America is described too as something that expects different races to change to form a new identity. People coming to this country would do that as an effort to survive and to be accepted.

And so magical is this pot that it has a 'special gadget' that can filter and turn down the black people from entering it. No matter how hard and how long a black skinned person tries to be a member of this unity in the melting pot, the 'sensitive censor' attached on the pot would be able to detect and throw him away.

Sam, watching, said, "Why, I was here
even before they came
and stepped in too, but was tossed out
before he passed the brim.

This quotation is confirming the tag of WASP for Americans and it pinpoints the discrimination that happens very strongly in the U.S.A. We can see that actually the value of egalitarianism that the Americans boast of is just a label they create. Racism and discrimination do happen. And the minorities, especially the black people, have become the victims since a long time ago until present time, in the U.S. I think the black are still labeled as 'slaves' (or at least they belong to a lower class compared to the white) and it has to become their 'identity'. That is why it has been very difficult for the black to be accepted as 'Americans'. In every circle of a society group there will always be some people who would reject them: "And every time Sam tried that pot/ They threw him out again."

Many white Americans have the prejudice toward the black. Maybe unconsciously it is because they are afraid to be 'beaten' by this group in the competition of reaching the American Dream once the black have the chance. As a self defense mechanism, they put forward the prejudice and the 'accusations' toward the black. They even think of the black as something dirty that may embarrass them: "Keep out. This is our private pot/



"We don't want your black stain." They think it is improper for the black to be together with them in that pot. The difference in skin color makes many white treated the black badly, as if these black people would stain the 'purity' of the white.

So now the theory that Hall puts forward (identity is a matter of positioning) does not apply as it 'normally' works. In this case the position the black occupy is not the America as a new country (so they could be the citizens as the other people) but those white position them as a group of people occupying a lower class in the society. And that is their 'identity', regardless their efforts to be on the par with the white; their achievements which many times are even better than the white; or even the acceptance they have got from the wider society in the world. We can see how determining a place is and how crucial a position is in gaining an identity.

The meaning of *position* is larger than mere literal, there are other factors influencing it. When one lives in a certain country or place (as a permanent citizen) it does not automatically mean that it would become his identity, but it would include many other considerations given by the people calling themselves as 'the native' of the country. The act of positioning can have an active or a passive sense. Some people who have some 'power' (in this case the white) would be able to position themselves, while those who are 'powerless' (for example the black and other minority groups) would have to accept their 'fate' to be positioned by others (the 'more powerful'). But actually the notion about the white as 'powerful' and the black as 'less powerful' is also an identity created by the white, which is made possible by the advantage of the white being the majority in their 'own country'.

Realizing that there is not much that he can do, the black (in this poem represented by Sam) decides to 'ignore' the perception of the white. I think he has finally come to a point of 'que sera sera'; he is no longer bothered by what the white would think of him. The important thing now for him is he would be what he is, a black American. This fact cannot be denied by the white even though they do not like it: At last, thrown out a thousand time,

Sam said," I don't give a damn.
Shove your old pot. You can like it or not,
but I'll be just what I am.

So now the matter of acceptance is not an issue anymore for him. He prefers to go on with his life; gaining and maintaining his 'new identity' that is 'not real American but not African either'. He must grab the new identity instead of being given by the white. Therefore he 'decides' to be active in labeling himself not wanting to be positioned by others. So the new identity for him and the other immigrants is (just like in the first poem) the 'floating' one, and they could just claim themselves to be somebody they want to be without any 'approval' from the 'native America'.

Conclusion

The speakers in the two poems are different, the first one is involved in the event and the latter is an observer who just 'sees' the happening. As the effect, we could feel the struggle (and the confusion) is stronger in the first poem, or I would say that it might make the readers feel more empathy toward the speaker. Meanwhile, the suffering told by an observer is not very deeply felt by us, it is easier 'to ignore' his feeling pain of being rejected and discriminated by a society claiming to be democratic and egalitarian.

And the resolution from the man there (Sam) seems to come easily, as if he does not take it seriously, something that is, as a matter of fact, must be fought for.

The diction in the first poem portrays the confusion and the mixture of identities that she experiences. She is not sure of herself, she 'does not know' who she is or where to go, that is why the poem uses some repetitions of some words (at a crossroad, *Spanish* → *spanglish*, *cannot return* → *no way back* → *have no home there*). And because she wants to tell that 'her people' does not exclusively experience the problem she also mentions other ethnic groups who shared the same problem. While in the second poem, the choice of word really supports the cynical tone (*magic pot*; *step out American step out again all freshly christened John*; *black stain*; *shove your old pot*). And since this is written by a white American, it is like a result of his reflection about 'his own people', that is why he has a feeling of cynicism toward the irony that happens in the big and powerful country; the United States of America.

The two poems contain similar message; people's (to be specific: the immigrants') struggles to get an acceptance from the people around them and this acceptance means they would also gain a new identity. Identity here is described as a mixture of many ingredients and does not stop at one point. In the first poem, she has to accept her identity as a person at a crossroad, a person as a result of a mixture. The second poem is the same, the pot creates new identity for people entering it; they are a mixture of many origins that are changed 'magically' into one new people. Both speakers in the two poems do not reach a certain point to decide their 'final' identity, but they just try to accept it for the time being. And the tone of each poem cleverly delivers the message; in the first poem the confusion of the woman makes her accept her new identity match with her place. While in the second poem the cynical point of view from the observer tells us how discrimination and prejudice / under estimation done by the white Americans toward the black (other colors) immigrants makes those immigrants choose their own place and label as their new identity.

If we relate this to Derrida's point of *to differ* and *to defer* (Guerin, 1992, p. 257), we can also see how their differences make it a continuous effort to know who they are. The search of the 'real / final' identity is deferred by many factors (some are as discussed in the two poems) that cause the never-ending process. The struggle would not end just like that, not ever. The acceptance and the rejection phase would occur and re-occur. And the fact that identity is a process of a shaping self which is related to where they are or that their position is the new identity for them.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Child of the Americas

By : Aurora Levins Morales

I am a child of the Americas

a light skinned mestiza of the Caribbean,
a child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroad.

I am a U.S. Puerto Rican Jew,
a product of the ghettos of New York I have never known.

An immigrant and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants.
I speak English with passion: it's the tongue of my consciousness,
a flashing knife blade of crystal, my tool, my craft.

I am Caribena, island grown. Spanish is in my flesh,
ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hips:
the language of garlic and mangoes,
the singnging in my poetry, the flying gestures of my hands.

I am of Latinoamerica, rooted in the history of my continent:
I speak from that body.

I am not African. Africa is in me, but I cannot return.
I am not taina. Taino is in me, but there is no way back.
I am not European. Europe lives in m, but I have no home there.

I am new. History made me. My first language was spanglish.
I was born at the crossroad
and I am a whole.

Appendix II

The Melting Pot By Dudley Randall, 1968

There is a magic melting pot
where any girl or man
can step in Chezh or Greek or Scot,
step out American.

*Johann and Jan and Jean and Juan,
Giovanni and Ivan*
step in and then step out again
all freshly christened John.
Sam, watching, said, "Why, I was here
even before they came,"
and stepped in, but was tossed out
before he passed the brim.

And every time Sam tried that pot
they threw him out again.



“Keep out. This is our private pot
We don’t want your black stain.”

At last, thrown out a thousand times,
Sam said, “I don’t give a damn.
Shove your old pot. You can like it or not,
but I’ll be just what I am