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The Future of Tomorrow Struggling with Domination

Growing up I was raised in a cultural environment that had very few people from my ethnicity; instead I was a black sheep in a herd of white sheep. Being that I experienced this, I was able to feel and see a loss of culture that overtakes an individual's identity and heart. This happens particularly in the youth or those individuals who are part of the 1st or 2nd generations to be born in America. From this, I, like many other individuals, was presented with two choices. The two choices were to identify with our native language and cultural background, or lose our culture and shape our personal identity around the dominant language in the country that is Standard American English (SAE). This situation is becoming problematic and should be addressed not only by communities but also by the academic realm because if this situation continues to happen then the "melting pot" that American is known to be will cease to exist. Schools should also address this problem being that the domination of English in school especially is causing a lack of programs designed for those individuals who do not speak English fluently to be scarce.

"Fight or flight" is often a phrase which we hear associated with instances related to death. One way which I felt that this phrase can be interrupted is in relation to language and culture. An individual can either chose to fight the dominance of SAE in America by still keeping their culture and native language close or to succumb to the culture of the English

language, which is the predominant language. Bell hooks states in her excerpt titled “Language” from her book Teaching to Transgress that “It [English] is the language of conquest and domination; in the United States, it is the mask which hides the loss of many tongues...” (168). This quote suggests that because domination of the English language is inevitable, it is causing the loss of a variety of languages in America. Individuals are coming to understand the power that the English language has and are thus converting their main language to it. Born and raised in the United States I was able to identify with this quote. From Kindergarten to Eighth grade, I attended a predominantly white school where there were only less than twenty minorities all together in the school. At a young age I was faced with a situation where two roads diverged; to the left I could chose to embrace my culture even though I didn’t speak the language fluently- fight or mold my personal identity to something I knew was not me but was the culture of the English language which I spoke most fluently- flight. This moment came to me in firth grade when I was faced with a situation that pointed out my culture in relation to language.

Back in the fifth grade I was the one chosen to read the spelling words aloud. When it came to pronouncing the word salmon, I pronounced it as a person with a Filipino accent would, “Salmon”, rather than “Salmen”. Being that this moment occurred at a younger age, it made me slightly ashamed of my culture. The kids were making fun of me because of my pronunciation even when I didn’t speak another language fluently enough to have an accent. I stood speechless in front of my fellow classmates who up to that point had seen me as a scholarly student who spoke Standard American English properly. I, for a moment, was transferred to the body of an individual who faces this situation everyday. Individuals, whose first language is not SAE, encounter the situation of looking not as knowledgeable due to their lack of speaking SAE properly to those “privileged” students who grew up speaking it. This situation showed me how

uncultured school systems can be. My private school did not even provide extra programs for students who may have more difficulty than I did with pronunciation of words or even the English language itself. The school had programs where Native English speakers who were having difficulty could sit down with volunteers to practice their speaking skills. As Paul Matsuda states in an essay titled “The Image of College Students and the Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity” is that “One of the persisting elements of the dominant image of students in English studies is the assumption that students are by default native speakers of a privileged variety of English from the United States.” (1) This shows that schools often assume that students can speak English fluently and that it is their first language. This poses a problem because then situations like at my private school will occur and those whose first language is not SAE will not be provided help. As time went on, this situation in which I encountered in my classroom taught me that I needed to fight. Being one of the only minorities in the school system, I needed to embrace my culture and heritage and not be ashamed of what had happened but to rather grow from the experience.

Many other individuals though tend to take the other path either due to the Americanization of many communities. Many individuals may take the path of flight rather than fight due to situations such as that of Geno's steaks. An article from Foxnews.com entitled “Philadelphia's Geno's Steaks Adopts English-Only Ordering Policy” speaks of the steak shop hanging signs stating “This is AMERICA: WHEN ORDERING ‘SPEAK ENGLISH’”. Situations like these may very well be the things that discourage people, especially the youth from keeping their native culture and language alive. Such situations like these that address things such as the immigration bill in a negative manner teach the youth that if an individual is going to move to America then they must adapt to the language of America. This can be very

discouraging to see signs like these posted at one of the most popular steakhouses that then discourage individuals to identify strongly with their culture. Barriers upon barriers are put up for individuals whose first language is not English or who have grown up speaking two languages. This is yet another example beyond the many barriers which have been up in the school system alone, that this situation also takes place in the public community for everyone to witness.

Being to be able to embrace one's culture and language in a school setting is especially important at a young age when children begin to define who they are as individuals. There are many unspoken stories much like the one Gloria Anzaldua speaks of in her essay entitled "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." She, like many, were placed in a school situation where she started to speak her native language but as soon as the teacher heard this she was told "If you want to be American, speak 'American'. If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong." (77) Not many individuals have experienced this situation.

Much like Anazaldúa, many feel offended if a person were to talk badly about their native culture. Imagining being put into Anazaldúa's situation if you have not personally experienced it is a terrifying thought and offensive in itself. It is offensive especially in a situation at school in front of peers. She was not even originally from Mexico yet because kept her language and culture a big part of her life; she was being seen as an immigrant. She was being discouraged to keep this language and culture in her, which in any case can discourage many. This is a problem that occurs especially with the youth whose parents are immigrants. School systems like in the case of Anazaldúa need to be culturally sensitive and aware of what they may say to students. It is often statements like these, which cause students to want to forget their native language and culture, or anything associated to it. Schools instead need to promote

cultural awareness especially in the staff members so that the environment will be one that students feel comfortable expressing their culture in. At a young age students are trying hard enough to fit into their surroundings and the more an individual will feel discouraged to keep their native language if it is seen as “wrongful” to speak. Anazaldúa decided to take the path of “fight” instead of “flight” and still remains culturally prideful to this day. She states in her essay “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.”(81) Her experience to fight should be an encouragement to youth who feel as if they are not accepted in school environments to identify more with their native language and culture.

This type of pride in youth is sometimes hard to find because many youth who are not as culturally aware get caught up in mainstream America. Some of those who were the 1st generation to be born in America see mainstream America as the ideal way of living especially because that is how many “privileged” speakers of SAE see it. Due to this they come to forget their heritage and much of their culture. I have seen many individuals and had a couple of friends who have had this situation happen to them. These individuals were more concerned about getting in with the fashions in America and learning about American pop-culture more than their native cultures. Though they were forgetting their heritage, they did not realize it because now they were fitting in with everyone else in the school systems. Being that they come from 1st generations of family to move to America, they have not experienced the hardships and struggles which their parents and family before that may have. Because they have not struggled to get to where they are now, it is sometimes hard for some to then have an appreciation for one’s cultural background and native language. Often to have an appreciation of one’s culture one must also have an understanding of the struggle in which people from that culture had to go through,

particularly if the immigrants who came to America were from a foreign land. Though mainstream America can be more appealing, it is not however mainstream culture that got many individuals to the places that they are now. It is instead their native roots that gave them the drive to get to where they are today and their struggles of oppression. Bell hooks' illustrates this in her essay stating, "How to describe what it must have been like for Africans whose deepest bonds were historically forged in the place of shared speech to be transported abruptly to a world where the very sound of one's mother tongue had no meaning" (169). This quote shows that the minorities of America, particularly the youth need to do as our ancestors did and stand out by keeping our language and culture in a world where the country is trying to forge us into one.

Many Filipino-American youth for example, acknowledge their culture deeply by openly showing it is a part of who they are but are not able to speak their language. The numbers of those who are able to even understand the language are dying down. This can also be a problem because of the school systems due to these Filipino-American youth seeing that accommodations were not being made for many of those students who they had seen coming straight from the Philippines who could not speak English efficiently. This is something that I was able to see first hand; I knew many individuals who were students coming straight from the Philippines who had great difficulty learning how to speak the English language but the school systems were not accommodating to them. Such accommodations that could be made are programs that give students extra time to work one-on-one with staff to improve their speaking and writing skills in SAE. Families can only do so much to enforce language and culture upon the youth being that students are more often around the school environment than home. It is the school surrounding where the youth spend most of their time. If the youth feel that their language and culture cannot be accepted in the school system even though it is accepted at home, they can still stray away

from their culture because they want to fit in with their surroundings. This is a problem because if this continues to occur, culturally rich school environments will cease to exist.

School systems should address this problem because due to statements like those from the teacher in Anazaldúa's case and lack of accommodation for students whose first language may not be English, there is a loss of culture within communities itself. Many school systems assume that those individuals who are part of the 1st generation or even the 2nd generation of family to be in America had grown up speaking SAE and that it was their first language. This is often problematic because some children of those individuals whose families that came here actually grew up speaking either their native language or their native language and English combined. This is a problem that many school systems do not account for or accommodate; much like Matsuda said in his essay, many school systems just assume that students know how to speak English fluently. If schools continue to do this then they are jeopardizing the grades of those students who cannot speak English fluently.

"The youth of today are the future of tomorrow", is a saying that is often heard. If the youth of today can't embrace their culture and native language completely while still having a sense of fitting in, then ultimately those cultures and languages will end up being lost. It is very important to keep the culture and language of our native lands alive within the youth so that it can be passed down from generation to generation. The passing down of language and culture can become a difficult thing for those individuals who were born or raised in the United States. I saw this first hand. Even though I can identify with my culture deeply, I am not able to speak the language fluently. This is a problem because the youth should be given the best future possible. The academic realm and communities in the United States need to address this problem so that the United States can still remain the culturally rich environment that it is known to be.

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