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Resistance Against Assimilation: The Irony of the Melting Pot

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Resistance Against Assimilation: The Irony of the Melting Pot

Abstract

The video on the large, flat-screen T.V. plays and shows a small, brown baby lying helpless in the arms of her mother, concealed in a thick and colorful shawl. Sneeze after sneeze seems to come from the newborn, as the room fills with the strong scent of smoke, the result of a glowing fire set in the middle of the room. The small bell rings and rings until there is ringing in everyone's ears, the sounds vibrating their skull and very being. The chanting seems to fill the small apartment, and everyone wonders in the back of their minds when the neighbors will come up and give a noise complaint. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Resistance, Diversity, Melting pot, Assimilation, Immigrants, Georges Lieber

Disciplines

Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies

Comments

Second place winner of the 2020 Georges Lieber Essay Content on Resistance.

Resistance Against Assimilation in America: The Irony of the Melting Pot

The video on the large, flat-screen T.V. plays and shows a small, brown baby lying helpless in the arms of her mother, concealed in a thick and colorful shawl. Sneeze after sneeze seems to come from the newborn, as the room fills with the strong scent of smoke, the result of a glowing fire set in the middle of the room. The small bell rings and rings until there is ringing in everyone's ears, the sounds vibrating their skull and very being. The chanting seems to fill the small apartment, and everyone wonders in the back of their minds when the neighbors will come up and give a noise complaint.

The priest then leans over the blazing fire, the orange glow highlighting the deep etchings on his face as he takes a small stick and paints across the baby's forehead in one quick stroke. It was as if he was the artist, and the baby his canvas. The red paint, sindoor, seems to bleed into the baby until it becomes a part of her, forever marking her as one with this ritual, one with this country of brown people. All relatives watch tensely as if some unknown hand or force will blow the sindoor off the baby's head and forever curse her.

The parents mutter a prayer under their breath as if they want nobody to hear, and bow their heads deeply, almost hiding the baby within the folds of their upper body. The video suddenly cuts: the rain outside is causing a problem with the signal.

My sister, who was scrolling through Twitter on her iPhone 7, looks up at the frozen screen. She seems clueless to the time period that we are supposed to be in right now: a millennia ago when the Hindu prince Rama became a god.

"Isn't that much smoke bad for a baby?" She asks, drawing out the word "baby" in a mocking-Indian accent.

As my mother opens her mouth to disagree, the video suddenly plays again, and I muttered a silent thanks to the gods up above, whose names I could not remember.

If I was younger, I would have watched these religious rituals with rapt attention in hopes of imitating it one day. I would soak in all of the knowledge that my parents gave me like a sponge, fascinated by the humming, rhythmic sound of a pooja. I used to read a chapter-book version of Ramayana, a violent Sanskrit epic featuring war and decapitated figures that were much too inappropriate for an eight-year-old. I used to try and sing along with the ancient Hindu mantras that my father played on the stereo every day, as I got ready to go to school. Each time I said a prayer, each time I spoke in my mother tongue, the red sindoor seemed to bubble up from my forehead, proudly marking me as a follower of Hinduism. Hinduism is deemed by Google to be simply a religion, while Hindus call it a “dharma”: a way of life.

I first got a chance to show off this so-called “way of life” when I started going to school with the red sindoor painted across my body. The paint was not actually there, but everybody could see it whenever I said “gods” instead of God, whenever I apologized to Saraswati, the goddess of learning, every time a student dropped a book. The sindoor was bleeding into my dialogue, my schoolwork, and my everyday actions to the point where one did not need to think twice to label me as a Hindu. This definition, this way of life, had become confining. Those around me judged me before they even got a chance to know me.

It became worse once I went to middle school, and began learning about the different religions of the world. “We all know that science is what explains the world’s phenomena, not religion,” I distinctly remember my World Studies teacher saying in sixth grade. “Religion is just a system of beliefs; science is a system of facts and knowledge.” Doubts began growing in my mind. My parents spoke of the gods as if they knew them and felt their power. If someone is so

confident in a belief, does it become a fact? And, most importantly, if I do not believe in any of these gods, if I am too embarrassed to invoke their name, does that make the Hindu religion fictitious?

As I got older, I could find no answer to these questions. As the typical teenage-woes of drama, romance, and self-hatred were thrown in my way, the connection that I had to faith seemed to grow distant. Eventually, I could feel myself unconsciously scrubbing away the sindoor, scrubbing away the substance that flowed within me like blood and had been a part of me since birth.

The fight between myself and my distant religious beliefs was not an internal battle. It was caused by the direct influence of immigrant assimilation, synonymous with Americanization. It was representative of the paradox that is America's "melting pot," which is the United States' pride for its diverse population and cultural acceptance. And yet, the country seems eager to mix immigrant-identities with "white" and "American" culture to create a more watered-down form of diversity.

Such a statement seems bold but not untrue when examining immigrant stories. When one of my friends was in elementary school, she was eating lunch when she suddenly got teased by her classmates for her green, Indian food. She is now 16 years old, and to this day, she still hides her food in her lunchbox whenever she eats, even though all of her friends are now Indian as well. A similar story can be told for my friend who's Vietnamese mother got strange looks on a flight home from California, where she could not stop coughing because she had a small cold. The same can be said for my Chinese classmate who got called a "walking coronavirus" by a group of American teenage boys during lunch who were throwing food at her, just for their own amusement. There's also the story of my friend who refused to be called by her real, Hispanic

name because people harassed her and made racist jokes about her name when she was in middle school.

One doesn't have to go far to uncover the underlying process of assimilation that nearly every immigrant has been reluctantly forced through. Immigrants are expected to adapt, fit in, and survive to achieve the American dream. The subtle remarks made towards those who are not native to our country are barely noticeable to others, and yet they sting with the bitter sense of superiority. The cruel irony is that no matter how hard immigrants, children of immigrants, or families try to assimilate to American culture, minute differences will still be noted and analyzed. No matter how many years one tries to become fully "American," those decades of "progress" become undone with a single comment by a coworker or peer who lacks understanding of the situation.

As a result, immigrants are now forced to remain on high alert in interactions that are not within their community. I remember how my mother would come home complaining because her boss or coworker corrected her pronunciation on a single word that she had difficulty saying out of a whole ten-minute presentation that she had given. How my friends refused to wear their beautiful Indian sarees out in public for fear of being seen by their non-Indian classmates. It's much easier for many immigrants to give in and submit to the lurking demands of others than to actively resist and maintain a secure grip on one's cultural identity.

Taking that first step towards resistance takes lots of willpower and motivation from the individual. Whenever my friends told me stories of their experiences with racism or ignorance, I would always ask how they responded to that person and what they did. For one friend who was bullied in second grade, the best answer that she could give me was that she used to sit there and cry for a little while before moving on. For my friend who was insulted for the color of her

Indian food, the most she could say for how she responded to the situation was, “I bring a thermos now, so it’s easier to conceal.” Hiding is a much more immediate and straightforward way of protecting oneself rather than facing the prospect of confrontation.

Resistance towards the process of assimilation comes in many stages, all of which are intertwined with each other and are all equally vital towards ensuring that immigrant voices are heard. It begins with finding stability and self-confidence within oneself before moving on towards larger-scale forms of resistance, such as standing up for one’s friends and advocating for the community on a broader scale.

The first stage comes in the form of establishing a community and stabilizing one’s identity, a stage that many children of immigrants, such as myself, struggle to manage. Rather than being able to pinpoint one’s identity in a singular place, it feels as if two parents, the United States and the parent’s country of origin, are undergoing a tough divorce and forcing the child to choose between one of the two. The ideal promise of America and the American dream is that the child will grow with a healthy mix of both cultural identities; learning about American culture in school and through interactions with classmates while being able to build a safe place at home to practice one’s inherited cultural identity. Yet the sad and more commonplace outcomes of such a process are the feelings of guilt for distancing oneself from their parent’s culture and feeling like an outcast for not entirely fitting into the mold of a typical American teenager. Children of immigrants often face isolation for not falling in completely with either of these groups.

One way that I’ve seen friends fight against this problem is building up communities of people who have had similar experiences and using these communities to share their stories publically. Unfortunately, minority populations continue to be marginalized in any form of

media, with around 87% of authors in the United States being white. Even when stories of immigrants do appear in the press, many of these are told by white authors who have never experienced these events. The oppressors continue to profit off of the oppressed, and such immigrant stories become whitewashed and sensationalized. A modern example of this would be *America Dirt*, which is often criticized for containing many inaccuracies about the Mexican immigrant experience, despite author Jeanine Cummins' alleged five years of research before writing and publishing the novel.

If more stories of immigrants were to appear in the media, people would be further educated on different cultures and thus not hold prejudices towards others. While consumers and readers likely cannot immediately change the practices of the media industry, they are still capable of promoting and supporting books published by marginalized authors. Increasingly, stories by immigrants are beginning to make their way into English classrooms due to student demand for literature that better represents them. In my English class in particular, when we studied America's "Great American Novels" we began to focus on not only classics such as *The Great Gatsby* or *the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but also stories of immigrants such as *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi and *In the Distance* by Hernon Diaz. We began to have more creativity in our writing, as our teachers allowed us to write about how our ethnicity and not just our academics or social life affect our day-to-day lives.

Students seem to have a better grasp on this imbalance in our literature, as I have seen numerous articles published by students that focus on representing minority students and families in school or county-wide newspapers. For example, in our school newspaper, the *Tide*, I worked closely with my editor and other writers to publish articles about ESOL students' experiences, how school boundary lines affect immigrants, and the policies that are made on the national scale

regarding minority groups. I also write for the Arts and Culture section of our county-wide newspaper, the MoCo Student, and there we often interview students about their experiences with religious holidays such as Navrati and Diwali or the Lunar New Year.

By establishing strong communities that are willing to support marginalized authors and other immigrants who wish to tell their stories, cultural identity can be strengthened in the United States as a whole and help stabilize the inevitable identity crisis that children of immigrants suffer through. It establishes that there isn't just one American narrative, but rather that everyone's experiences in America are unique, and nobody can make judgments on others based on their own experience.

It is only possible to move to the second stage, benevolence and helping out others, once the first stage of stabilization and self-confidence is achieved. By having a strong sense of identity, it will become easier to guide friends and family through potentially traumatizing emotional experiences. Thus, they, in turn, can develop a stable and robust identity that can be used to help people that they know, resulting in a never-ending cycle of kindness and benevolence towards immigrants who don't often receive such sentiments.

Standing up towards ignorance may be hard for some people, as there's always a danger when it comes to confrontation. Furthermore, there's still the chance of encountering more subtle instances of racism or unwarranted comments, in which it's difficult to intervene as one does not want to make it seem like they are overreacting. For example, several of my Asian friends have had people that they are close to pull at their eyes or say "ching chong" in an attempt to crack a joke. In reality, such small actions can be just as hurtful as more blatant forms of disrespect and are more challenging to take a stand against due to its subtle nature. However, it's essential to change the perceptions of others and stand up against all forms of hatred or racism that

immigrants in the community face. Doing this with friends and getting large groups of people on board with this idea can help make this task seem less daunting.

Once a strong community is built, and guidance and support have been given towards others, this new self-confidence can be channeled into the next stage of resistance: advocacy. In a perfect world, teenagers would be spending their time hanging out with their friends or spending their free time with their families. Instead, the more familiar sight today is student advocacy, particularly against local issues that affect immigrants in our community.

In our county, in particular, one pressing issue is the boundary lines of our school system and how they disadvantage those who are less wealthy or are part of an ethnic minority. The Board of Education for our county awarded the firm WXY Architecture and Urban Design \$475,000 to analyze the boundary lines, and provide suggestions as to how they can be improved. Several students from the county had testified before the Board of Education and argued how schools remain segregated, and how funding is different between schools of wealthier and poorer neighborhoods. “It’s been understood for a long time that MCPS and its district lines are the product of racist housing policies from the 1950s to 1960s,” sophomore Uma Fox said to the Tide Newspaper of Richard Montgomery High School. “And we see the ramifications of that policy today in the way our schools are zoned where schools are oftentimes not reflective of the diversity of this county and do not offer students an equal chance at opportunities.”

Advocacy allows for direct lobbying for equality for immigrants and ensures that immigrant voices are heard in state legislatures. Although one can argue the effectiveness of such testimonies, they further spread information about the impacts of current legislation or policies that are being considered. Students may not have been aware of the school boundary’s

effect on racial minorities' quality of education before testimonies and advocacy from students such as those from my school. Such advocacy efforts need to be combined with the support from the community, the first stage of resistance, to ensure that such efforts are not going unnoticed. That's why I worked hard with the school newspaper and student advocates to publish an article that covers the boundary study in-depth so that students have information about such material. Through local media sources, such information can effectively be spread across the county and thus appears to have a resounding impact in the community.

While ignorant remarks and a lack of cultural appreciation remains a common scar on the immigrant experience in America, it is crucial to recognize how small, simple interactions can affect other people. By teaching children at a young age what it means to respect others and their cultural values, the system as a whole can change to become more accepting of minorities and provide a better experience for future children of immigrants as a whole.

Many immigrants today still face the problem of being assimilated into American culture to survive and achieve the American dream. This often comes with a lack of resistance towards backhanded and subtle comments about appearance, religion, or cultural practices. This, unfortunately, is a step in the wrong direction, and yet happens to be the only or the most natural path for most immigrants who struggle to establish a strong community or livelihood due to a lack of support when arriving in the United States.

The most effective forms of resistance that I have seen so far have been through the establishment of communities and self-identity, benevolence, and standing up for others who face similar, challenging situations, and publicly advocating for increased awareness and a change in policy. While a single individual may not be strong enough to make a change, if

immigrants and those who are citizens in the United States join forces, the resistance against the racism and the process of assimilation as a whole has the potential to become stronger.