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Conquering the Odds

Today Salinas, California holds a great bilingual presence in the Spanish-Speaking Community. They are a community like any other people who work, have family, and even have their own individual life stories. Among these individuals, there were interviewees who were stuck in between the borderlines of prejudice and social status; which deals with language barriers, social and economic hardships, or having a different ethnic and cultural background.

From the interviews that were conducted with Sylvia Garcia, born 1962 in a small village called Atlacomulco near Mexico City, and Jose Ramirez, born in Watsonville, California May 11, 1982, the two narratives were very different because of the time periods the two individuals lived in. Sylvia went through social and economic hardships from an early age: “I lived the first 4 years of my life in Mexico, then we moved to Castroville, California in the Labor Camps in 1966. By 1973, residency was established by my dad, Diego Garcia, in Salinas, California. It wasn’t an easy time for Mexicans. We were called wetbacks or beaners, but not acknowledged as Chicanos” (Garcia ). However, for Jose Ramirez, who was born in a later generation, these were not his primary struggles:

I grew up in Salinas, CA. As kids it was fun growing up, riding bikes, fishing from ponds, picking agriculture crops for fun, then as we got older, friends started to smoke pot, hang out with gang affiliation & friends we all grew up had to choose sides from red & blue gangs, so it got awkward and different as we became teens and[during the] high school years. The challenges of being bilingual was that many communities growing up in my neighborhood spoke fluent Spanish and my brother and I had a hard time trying to adapt to the neighborhood, so we had to pick the language from friends, family & peers.(Ramirez)

Despite the social struggles with Jose Ramirez and his generation, the previous generations of the early 70’s and back had a different and difficult struggle, which involved more discrimination, especially for non-Anglo-American groups across the United States.

Similarly, in *Dolores Huerta a Reader,* by María T. García explains that “Huertas work has been multifaceted. She supported and participated in Mexican American Civil Rights struggles as part of the 1960’s and 1970’s Chicano Movement” (XIX). Following this, the southern states were even worse with written laws, known as Jim Crow Laws, versus unwritten prejudice in California around the time. As Maria E. Franquiz explained in *Word Were All We Had, Becoming Biliterate against the Odds,*edited by Maria de la Luz Reyes,“In March of my 3rd grade, my father was transferred to North Carolina…I later noticed signs separating negroes and whites in certain places…This segregation scared my mother. She missed San Juan even more because her English language skills were ineffective in North Carolina. I also noticed my father wore his U.S. Army uniform… as a way to command respect.” (126-127). Empathetically, during and after the Civil Rights struggles, human rights conditions have gotten better, but prejudice is still out there. In the 90’s Jose Ramirez experienced culture shock:

Yes, I have experienced prejudice during my early initial entry to the military, had a burial funeral detail in Arkansas and Oklahoma, we wanted to go into a bar restaurant and they didn't want to serve our kind. Being from California, I didn't really know what our kind meant, because Cali is very multiCultural and didn't see it that way, being from here. We just left the restaurant and got service somewhere else, but I dealt with it by understanding how other states still discriminate and have prejudice. People in the U.S. are just trying to distinguish each individual and by how they might have grown up by their peers and parents. (Ramirez)

Despite California being a very progressive state, it also has an ugly past of hate. As mentioned earlier by Sylvia, Mexicans had a hard time, and Sylvia had to grow out of speaking Spanish because of this: “Going to elementary school in Castroville and Salinas, teachers didn’t like the Spanish Speakers, so we were punished with a ruler slap on the hand or we had to face the blackboard with our noses toward it standing up. Anyone who didn’t speak Spanish, made fun of the way I talked. So, I stopped speaking and sat in the back” (Garcia, S). Furthermore, the value of language and identity was specifically unwelcomed by those who didn’t understand anything foreign.

In the same fashion, identity and foriegn language struggles from the inside out. First, we struggle with people who speak the same language and/or our own community who claim you’re not your own ethnicity. As Maria T. Garcia has it written in her book,

At times, Cesar Chavez even reacted to Huerta’s independent personality and said to her: ‘You’re not Mexican.’ She replied: ‘I know it’s true, I am a logical person. I went to school, and you learn that you have to weigh both sides and look at things objectively.’ Chavez is more dogmatic while Huerta was able to have a sense of both ‘lo Mexicano and lo Americano.(25)

Equally important, from the narrative of Maria Franquiz there was prejudice among the bilingual community, however, different in national origin this was a shock to her growing up:

One bitter memory I carry…was inflicted by a Mexican American Teacher who made fun of the Puerto Rican Spanish Variant that I used the first day of school. When I asked her, ‘¿Dónde puedo encontrar la parada de guaguas?” (“Where can I find the bus Stop?”), She answered, ‘Speak English. And the correct word for bus is camion…’ I assumed that guaguas(buses) referred to the same vehicle in Puerto Rico and in El Paso where there were many Spanish Speakers (De la luz Reyes, 127).

Apparently, this was caused by a rule to forbid native Spanish speakers from speaking their language at the school Franquiz had attended; “At St. Joseph’s, in the 1950’s, there was a rule that no Spanish was to be used on school grounds, and English only was strictly upheld” (De la Luz Reyes, 29). So, in this case the problem isn’t oneself but the outside forces that put another community down.

Second, the struggle of oneself happens to the individual who hates who they are and where they come from:“I hated being Mexican because of the way I was treated. At some point, a male teacher was being verbally abusive toward me when I was the age of 16 working under an organization called the Monterey Youth Program. So, I was going to report him, then he told me; ‘You’re a stupid Mexican and no one wouldn’t believe you.’’ Sylvia mentioned. As has been noted, it is not the individuals that hate themselves, but the society that indirectly makes them hate who they are. Sometimes it takes just a little push from role models to give value to an individual that makes them accept who they are under social pressure and prejudice. As Silvia explained: “My father struggled against the odds without education since 11 and provided for his family and he owned his own home. He was very persistent. And my Mom was the backbone, heart, and soul; proud to be Mexican. She would ask me; ‘Do these people mean anything?” In this case, her mom’s question implied that you should not let people get under your skin and make you feel ashamed of yourself. In fact, in New York, decades ago from today in the narrative of Sonia Nieto in *Words Were all We Had*… role models were the bread and butter of her upbringing: “My parents held onto their Identity and…they helped me to forge my own, an identity different from theirs, one that is part U.S., part Puerto Rican, Part ‘Nuyorican,’ a hybrid identity forged in love and in struggle”(De la Luz, 25). Furthermore, years after the Civil Rights struggle, prejudice, and the fall of Jim Crow laws in the South, life was becoming easier for people of color or people from a poor economic background. Although we still see discrimination today, we still recognize the sacrifices of others and even benefit greatly from them. For example, Jose also has a variety of role models who influenced him:

As a young boy, I loved watching sports, so my role models were more like sports figure,… then as a teen my role model was My older Brother, & cousin because he always had lots of friends,… gangs, athletics or Rasta boys were more of my generation and not much of a great role model influence, but then again I was very young and didn't know much about the role models such as civil rights leader Cesar Chavez. (Ramirez)

In addition to that, looking up to people who put society on the right path helps to cope with discrimination.

Equally important if it weren’t for leaders in the Civil Rights struggle who defied the Jim Crow laws or participated in the Chicano Movement with farmworkers, I probably wouldn’t have many opportunities as a person of color. Not to mention a person defines who they are and not their origin; “I’m not Mexican, nor American. I’m just the person who defines me.” (Garcia ) As a result, the value of unity opens doors to go beyond borderlines and be multilingual.

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