The Question(s) of Success:
Understanding Racialized Conceptions of Success in Mexican and Jewish Acculturation

By Cailyn Hansen

Immigrants often must balance the relationship between becoming American and maintaining cultural heritage. In Marxist discourse, this relationship, especially when contextualized by a specific nationality, has been termed the National Question. The most notable national question is the Jewish Question. Removed from its polemic and anti-Semitic context, the Jewish Question investigates the interplay of political emancipation and assimilation and religious/cultural abandonment. Within the context of Latinx Studies, a similar question has been posed of Mexican Americans. The Mexican Question even surfaced in several articles in popular media during the 1860s. I continue to extend the idea of a national question beyond its capitalist and Marxist framework – and reject its association to nativism and racism – and pose what I call the Plural Society Success Question. I evaluate a race- and gender-conscious understanding to success and how these identities affect immigrants' acculturation. I further situate these questions within in-groups themselves and ask, like José Limón, how individuals of a culture group ask themselves and peers these questions of success while acculturating.

I compare the work of Russian Jewish American Abraham Cahan, specifically *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), and *George Washington Gómez* (written circa 1935, published 1990) by Tejano Américo Paredes in this paper. The former, written in the style of an autobiography, chronicles the life and wealth accumulation of David Levinsky. He is an Orthodox Russian Jew who immigrates to America after the murder of his mother and continued dissatisfaction with Talmudic study. Once in America he eventually trades his Judaism for capital and status. *George Washington Gómez*, an often-interpreted work in Latinx literary studies, describes the difficult "immigrant" life of Gómez. Living in the fictitious Texas-Mexico border town of Jonesville, he struggles to situate his identity as a light-skinned Tejano. In the conclusion of the novel, he joins the U.S. military in a project against fellow Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

I draw substantial parallels between these novels and use the additional scholarship on the Jewish Question and Cahan to reevaluate prominent readings of Paredes and *George Washington Gómez*. I respond to José Limón that his modernist readings of *George Washington Gómez* fail to appreciate Paredes's own internal struggle in identity formation and success-making. I rely heavily on Ramón Saldívar and Leif Sorenson but also challenge these scholars to go further (into postmodernism). I use the varying readings of the *corrido* and bildungsroman forms to argue that, like Cahan, Paredes does not offer, indeed does not have, a solution to the Plural Society Success Question. These authors instead consider a precursory question that asks what success is and how it is differentiated by racial subjectivity and gender roles.

Introduction

> "I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer."
>
> *– The Rise of David Levinsky*

> "Does 'your country' include the Mexicans living in it?"
> "I'd rather not go into that again. I must leave."
>
> *– George Washington Gómez*

Immigrants, whether across spatial, temporal, or geopolitical boundaries, must examine their position with respect to their former and current contexts.[1] More concretely, immigrants must negotiate their relationship between a homeland culture and a new plural culture. John W. Berry terms this negotiation "acculturation". Unlike recent usages imply, acculturation is distinct from assimilation. Here he uses, as I will follow, the term acculturation in the most neutral way possible. Acculturation is any framework that a culture group – dominant or non-dominant – or individual employs to navigate a plural society. In developing the set of approaches to acculturation, he categorizes their differences along two axes, cultural maintenance and societal participation. With this division, he articulates four specific strategies corresponding to the four quadrants drawn by these axes: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization – collectively the acculturation strategies (Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation).

The choice of acculturation strategy can be framed as an answer to the so-called National Question. Conceptualizations of the National Question emanate from Marxist scholarship. Various Marxist scholars, including Bauer, Stalin, Lenin, and Marx himself, have written about the National Question and its relation to culture groups. While much of the work considers the

[1] Throughout this article, I will use immigrants to also refer to Mexican Americans who became immigrants by the "border crossing them." I recognize the inaccuracy this decision produces, but it is convenient, allows for brevity, and does not otherwise substantially affect my analysis.

political viability of different nation-states basis – geographical or ethnonational – it also is motivated by an understanding of the appropriate place of ethnic bodies in a plural society. The most notable national question is the Jewish Question. Removed from its polemic and anti-Semitic context, the Jewish Question investigates the interplay of political emancipation and assimilation and religious/cultural abandonment. Specifically, Bauer writes that Jews must forgo their religiosity to fully participate in secular states, claiming this specific acculturation strategy (assimilation) answers the Jewish Question (The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy). The Jewish Question is not the only national question I consider here, though. The idea of acculturation as seen through the National Question is reinforced by José Limón. He argues Mexican Americans "have also broached [their] own 'Mexican Question,' which is 'How are *we* [Mexican Americans] to define ourselves and make our way in such an American society?'" (Américo Paredes: Culture and Critique 10, emphasis in original). Both these specific versions of the National Question ask what to do/how to achieve. This similar foundation enables the production of a more generalized connection that moves beyond the limits of specific nation-states and explores how immigrants choose to acculturate.

In developing a specific construction of the National Question by which to continue my analysis, I turn to the second component of the Mexican and Jewish Questions: achievement. The questions not only consider the specifics of how to achieve but also implicitly ask what that achievement is. The pathways of success, especially against an American Dream and individualistic exceptionalism backdrop, are central to immigrant narratives and self-actualization. I argue for a generalized success question that frames achievement in terms of success and asks how individuals navigate success achievement in a plural society. In a perhaps obvious construction, I produce the text of the National Question as to ask: "As a non-dominant

member of a plural society, how do I achieve success?" Perhaps a better name for this question, removing itself from the allusions of nations, would be the Plural Society Success Question. With this new phrasing of the National/Plural Society Success Question, I explicate the different approaches to acculturation employed in ethnic literature and cultural production. Specifically, I further draw on Berry's acculturation strategies to describe the authors' insight offered to other members of their ethnic in-group to understand immigrants' pursuit of success.

There are other considerations I deem necessary in my pursuit to understanding the connection of ethnic literature and the Plural Society Success Question. In theorizing the specifics of acculturation, I consider how identity, specifically identity subjectivity, affect notions of success and acculturation. In this essay, I highlight race, ethnicity, and gender. Traditional pathways to success are gated by structural and situational restrictions, namely systematic racism and overt discrimination. It is necessary to consider how one understands their opportunity as a function of their race and ethnicity. Whiteness is not a binary designation that cleanly elucidates access. Rather, it is a messy entanglement of legal, social, and cultural evaluations and privileges. I examine the relationship between whiteness/white-passing and how it affects the available opportunities. Relatedly, I consider how literary production reinforces cultural values of racial status by celebrating race and ethnicity. Gender further complicates this analysis. The gender of immigrants intimately recontextualizes their acculturating experiences. Within my analysis that follows, I consider the different ways that male characters produce their gender and navigate gender roles. Latinx folklore offers the *corrido* to examine a specific ethnic masculinity and its further inscription in Chicano culture. I also employ the bildungsroman to understand racial identity formation and gender construction against a backdrop of coming of age.

Beyond identity concepts, another important variation to understanding acculturation becomes salient: the agency in the decision of an acculturation strategy. It would be a mistake to assume that all immigrants desire to become a mirror of the surrounding dominant hegemonic society. However, as Elda María Román points out, many immigrants are denied upward mobility when upholding their culture. Hyper-present factors of racism, nativism, and hegemonic Anglo-American culture often produce a de facto necessity for assimilation in the pursuit of the prototypical capitalist success. Many immigrants forwent cultural maintenance in order to enter the space, both physically and metaphorically, afforded to hegemonic success. Notwithstanding, other immigrants intrinsically pursued assimilatory tendencies (Introduction). This variance in agency and acculturation strategy offers another vantage point to situate the literary production of ethnic writers.

It is this constellation of race, gender, acculturation strategy, agency, and notion of success, I argue, that must collectively be analyzed to understand the effect of the jointly migrant and oppressed experiences. For this essay, I turn to two classic American works of ethnic literature. The first is an often-studied work of Latinx literature *George Washington Gómez* (published 1990, although written in the pre-World War II era of the 1930s and 1940s) by Américo Paredes. The second, frequently appearing in Marxist critique although rarely, if ever more than once, in Latinx literary analysis, is *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) by the Jewish American author Abraham Cahan. There is wealth of scholarship available on these works individually.[2]

[2] The only source I can find that is situated within some rubric of Latinx literary studies is the dissertation, *The Bordering Nation*, by Jane Margaret Creighton that briefly acknowledges *The Rise of David Levinsky* and the comparative work undertaken by Werner Sollors in analyzing *The Rise of David Levinsky* and *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912/1927) as commentaries of ethnic assimilation and capital success.

I start by considering Ramón Saldívar's work on Paredes and *George Washington Gómez*. Saldívar writes extensively on both in his book *Borderlands of Culture.* I focus primarily on his writings in the chapter "Checkerboard of Consciousness" although incidentally draw on his other chapters on modernity and gender identity construction. Saldívar contextualizes Guálinto against "the in-betweenness of the borderlands of culture" (165). In doing so, he repositions Guálinto as a subject-effect of the duality of the Mexican folklore tradition and "pluralist American melting-pot ideology" (165) and the bifurcated subject of an ethnic subaltern. This status as neither fully agent nor object creates a subject who is alone and "confused in social, racial, and even linguistic terms" (166). The effect thereof is the creation of a "new middle class, partially assimilated and wholly alone, the quintessential buffer between Anglo-American and Mexican American modernity," (166-7) to which Guálinto becomes the precursor. Saldívar understands this in-betweenness and multiplicity of identity, as I will as well, through the various names of Gómez. On one hand we have "George Washington" the fully assimilated American who embraces a respectable white masculinity rooted in heterosexuality and middle-class success, and on the other we have "Guálinto" the gringo-hating Mexican imbued with the *machismo* of a *corrido* ethnic masculinity. Gómez rejects both by becoming George Garcia Gómez. In the process, he forms a new suspended diachronic border identity that mitigates a plurality of these various masculinities. Saldívar concludes that the resolution to Paredes's "open question" – a version of Limón's Mexican Question – is "an initial and tentative expression of the now widely explored complexities of Chicana and Chicano subject identity" (188).

José Limón in *Américo Paredes: Culture and Critique* responds to Ramón Saldívar (and José Saldívar who writes a substantially similar critique as the other Saldívar), rather assertively,

that their analyses ahistorically resolve the "open question" of the ending of *George Washington Gómez* and over zealously projects the future – the postmodern ethnonationalism of the Chicano/a Movement – into the past. In rejecting this reading (and the poly-temporality of Paredes's novel), he argues that Guálinto must be read as having accepted "a total political, structural, and cultural assimilation" (21). He acknowledges this supposed reality as a perfectly viable, if depressing, solution to the Mexican Question. Limón then ventures to re-understand Guálinto not through the *corrido* but instead through racial melancholia, specifically the loss of his father and its impact on his racial subjectivity. The juxtaposition of this melancholia to his Mexican identity results in him rejecting it in favor of the pursuit of Anglo-American culture.

Turning now to *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Philip Joseph investigates Cahan's relationship to his differing writings in Yiddish and English. Joseph argues that the switch from writing in Yiddish to English allowed Cahan the freedom to explore the Jewish Question without the need to provide a definitive answer. "The world of English fiction offered him… an intellectual hiatus from the obligations and narrow conventions of Yiddish journalism… by writ[ing] for audiences who had never openly debated the Jewish [Q]uestion" (Literary Migration: Abraham Cahan's 'The Impossible Bride-groom' and the Alternative of American Fiction 4-5). Removed from the traditional expectations, Cahan was able to push the limits of the genre of realism in representing answers to the Jewish Question.

Benjamin Schreier argues that Cahan's "work dialectically bridges languages, political systems, nations, and practices" (The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History 80). While not occurring at border sites as we generally think of them, there is nonetheless value in conceptualizing the acculturation of immigrants broadly as being able to produce these dialectics. Schreier positions this understanding as one of desire –

desire for Jewishness. David can simultaneously assimilate while still desiring a pre-assimilatory identity. Incorporating desire – longing – "reorients identity as a machine that compels from an indeterminate future" (79). David's Jewishness is thereof not constrained to a fixed racial substrate. Instead, in a plural American context, David has the freedom to produce Jewishness in new forms that rely not on a resistant past but a hopeful future.

Despite the substantial work on these pieces individually, they have never been placed directly in conversation with each other.[3] I bring these seemingly distant novels together for four primary reasons. The first is premised on the functional similarity and depth of the characters in both novels. Central to the main characters' progression throughout the novels is their internal struggle of self-worth and external notions of success. Further, each character learns about their ethnic masculinity through interactions with their mothers and female love interests. The second is the temporal setting of these novels. While occurring in different time periods, they each occur during an apex of immigration for the identities of their respective characters. Further, they occur under the common rubric of racist policy and practices and overt female subjugation. This allows me to draw parallels between these migrants and ethnic and gendered experiences. The third motivation is that these novels each end rather cynically. Guálinto appears to end as an anti-hero, betraying his otherwise fervent support of his Mexican identity and his Mexican and Tejano siblings. David likewise sacrifices his cultural Jewishness for the unfettered pursuit of economic success and prestige. The final justification is their potential readings as works of ethnic bildungsroman, which I explain in more detail later.

Through close readings of these novels and an incorporation of secondary analyses, I show that Parades and Cahan wrote functionally similar novels that ask their respective ethnic in-

[3] Again, Creighton's work comes closest.

group the Plural Society Success Question. With this new conceptualization, I argue that the previous scholarship of Limón and both Saldívars miss the valuable understanding offered by the conclusion of *George Washington Gómez*. Specifically, I offer a middle ground between their analyses. I do not read *George Washington Gómez* as a work of resistance literature in the manner of the Saldívars and the *corrido*. However, I also reject the finality of Limón's reading that produces Guálinto as "assimilated and colonized" possessing a "'solid bourgeois and modernist identity'" (Américo Paredes: Culture and Critique 14) offered by the bildungsroman. Instead, drawing on Sorenson's multiculturalism and Schreier's work on Cahan and the Jewish Question, I attempt to elucidate an in-between (and inherently postmodern) genre – one that is negatively defined as neither fully a corrido nor an ethnic bildungsroman and positively defined as generatively constructing racial subjectivity that is intentionally indecisive. I argue that Limón's modernist readings are limited in their success to explain the effect of Paredes's work and Saldívar's work limits itself in considering the conclusion as an "open question" but then closing it. The explicitly post-modern non-answer – the simultaneous yes and no – better captures the depth of the conceptualizations of the answer to the Plural Society Success Question and the racial subjectivities available to racialized beings.

Self-Pity as Self-Criticality

I begin my analysis by focusing on Cahan and *The Rise of David Levinsky*. I produce a reading that I then use to situate my subsequent work in the reading of Paredes. This insight offers a new way of looking at *George Washington Gómez* that challenges the previously dominant scholarship. As Joseph notes, Cahan is afforded distance from the Jewish Question by his switch from Yiddish to English writing (Literary Migration: Abraham Cahan's 'The Impossible Bride-groom' and the Alternative of American Fiction). Nonetheless, Cahan brings it

up squarely in this novel because he has the freedom to omit a definitive resolution. The beginning of *The Rise of David Levinsky* shows a young Russian Orthodox Jewish David balancing his coming of age and cultural teachings to embrace a religious life. After the death of David's mother, he embeds himself further in Judaic piety and Talmudic study. Despite influences from peers relating to his sexuality and belief in God, he remains devote, if slightly off the "ideal" path. Once in America, he remains steadfast in his Orthodoxy, refusing to shave off his forelocks, despite the benefit that his landlord and friend say will come.

It is quickly suggested, however, that this cultural maintenance will not last. Within the first several hours in the United States, David has the following conversation with an elderly Jewish woman. David asks, "Can't a fellow be a good Jew in America?" She responds, "Yes, of course he can, but – well, wait till you see for yourself" (94). Several pages and a few months later, David comments to the reader, "If you are a Jew of the type to which I belonged when I came to New York and you attempt to bend your religion to the spirit of your new surroundings, it breaks. It falls to pieces" (110). It is at this point that we see most prominently the internal conflict that will ensue throughout the novel.

Eventually, David sacrifices the commitment to religion he promised. "It was not long before her predication as to the fate of my beard came true. I took a shave. What actually decided me to commit so heinous a sin was a remark dropped by one of the peddlers that my down-covered face made me look like a 'green-one'" (111). David begins to reject his Orthodox Jewish cultural tradition – never to regain it – once he is othered as a new immigrant despite his time already in the Unites States. David had undertaken an integrationist approach to acculturation, embracing the capitalism of the street peddler with his continued Orthodox appearance. However, the societal structures around him force him to an alternative acculturation strategy.

His framework of success was not attainable under integration. After this point, he embraces fervently the pursuit of learning Anglo-American culture and mannerisms. In doing so, he consequently cements his efforts to achieve a social whitening/whiteness.

Throughout the novel, David examines the relationship of his success and achievement vis a vis further abandonment of his Orthodox roots. David informs the reader, "My loneliness often took on the pungence of acute physical discomfort. The more I achieved, the more painful my self-pity" (377). I use this notion of self-pity to generalize the internal/external conflict center to this novel. It is this pitying (indeed self-pitying) that drives David's self-criticality. Cahan uses the final chapter to have David evaluate his life and the decisions he took. David's self-critique is apparently obvious. The final chapter begins "Am I happy?" (525). He then ventures for several pages detailing the various aspects of his life, concluding several times "No, I am not happy" (526) or "There are moments when I regret my whole career" (529). Cahan brilliantly ends with a duality of David's inner and outward identity, which is provided as the opening epigraph. "David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer" (530). This divide represents for Cahan the difficulty of success and simultaneous cultural maintenance. Specifically, Esther Romeyn argues *The Rise of David Levinsky* "has the distinction of pointing beyond the discrepancies – dualities – that superficially rule the novel, to the underlying psychological and narrative unity – desire – in which they are subsumed" (Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York 1880-1924 91). Cahan leaves David in a state of non-resolution that has vectors of success and status fighting against those of cultural maintenance. This is entirely framed against a backdrop of desire and personal disappointment that produces physically-felt self-pity.

Further, the specific form of *The Rise of David Levinsky* adds to this internalized conflict. The book is written in a self-conscious, first-person voice. Therefore, the specific form produced by Cahan cannot be excavated from the specifics of David as a character. David cannot hide behind an unspoken reality – an explicitly stated conflict is necessarily an internal one as well. Romeyn further shows how the use of adverbial qualification to David's own manner of speech and thought demonstrates his inner/outer conflict of success and cultural maintenance. Examples include: "'I said, feelingly' (276); 'I rejoined, fervently' (476); 'I answered, with filial docility' (396); [and] 'I said, ardently' (396)." This dual form offers the possibility, continues Romeyn, of understanding assimilation as a social reality contributing to a "sense of loss of self and inner division" (90).

Internal division and desire, I argue, produce David as the embodied intentional non-answer to the Jewish Question. Cahan's work here is his attempt to explore unhampered the limits and contours of the set of answers to the Jewish Question. In a 500-plus-page tome, Cahan specifically reaches through various options and potential versions of success – not only economic but also religious and social. Joseph explicates the role of Cahan's characters. They "do not forfeit their identity, but neither do they possess it entirely…. Committed to understanding the Jewish resettlement in America, [Cahan] is at the same time reluctant to plot its end" (Literary Migration: Abraham Cahan's 'The Impossible Bride-groom' and the Alternative of American Fiction 24-5, 28-9). Cahan's novel is neither righteously final nor presumptuously total. The range of possibility offered by Cahan may all be incorrect (indeed, cannot be universally true) or may fail to address other viable options to acculturation. Its flexibility in design allows for varying interpretations that intentionally challenge the idea of assimilation as a

universality. This central idea gives the primary weight to the postmodern reading, which enlightens a new reading of Paredes.

In *George Washington Gómez*, Guálinto undergoes a similar transformation to David's arc from culture maintenance to assimilation. Early in the novel, Guálinto approaches his cultural maintenance with imagery of militant-ness and violence. Guálinto blurts out while speaking to his uncle, "'Just wait till I grow up! … Just wait till I'm a man. I'll get our land back. I'll… shoot them down like dogs. … I'll kill all the Gringos and *rinches* too, and drive them away from here'" (103, emphasis in original). About half-way through the novel, Guálinto again shows his position on his white-passing ethno-Mexican identity. He voluntarily decides not to enter a school dance because his friends who are not white passing are denied entry. In doing so, he forfeits the fourteen dollars for the suit he bought for the occasion and leaving his white "as a white silk dress" (167) Spanish date behind. Guálinto finds greater value in supporting this fellow Mexicanos and Tejanos over his financial and personal loss. The novel is, however, pebbled throughout with moments of racial self-hatred and longing-love for Anglo-American culture. The development of Guálinto cannot be read linearly and instead models the sporadic trajectory underlying racial identity formation and its subjectivity.

The greatest departure from cultural maintenance is seen in Paredes's final section. This section is self-reflective (being entitled "Leader of his People") like Cahan's but is not immediately as self-critical. At its surface, Guálinto is the embodiment of an anti-hero, turning against cultural maintenance and supporting individual self-progress. While I do not challenge that Guálinto has turned against his Mexicano siblings, I nuance the idea of an uncritical transformation. Lief Sorenson argues in *Ethnic Modernism and the Making of US Literary Multiculturalism* that *George Washington Gómez* is both and simultaneously neither a *corrido*

nor ethnic bildungsroman. I concur with this claim as it relates to Guálinto's racial and gender identity formation but challenge the subsequent assertion: "In a novel that carefully represents the formation of the protagonist's subjectivity, it is striking that his most dramatic transformation is unrepresented. By skipping over the protagonist's transformation from Guálinto into George, the novel implies representing such a transformation is beyond its power" (104). This reading errs in claiming Paredes skipped the transitional moment. Throughout the novel, Guálinto is continually challenging and reevaluating his position to Anglo culture and practice. His identity is intimately reproduced along this boundary of whiteness and Mexican, operating adjacent to upward mobility narratives. The transformation of identity is not singular, representable by a specific moment or scene. Rather, it is the culmination of years of internal turmoil and struggle adjacent to peer and familial learning that slowly shapes and contorts one's racial identity formation. Omi and Winant speak to this in *Racial Formations*. One's racial identity is not a product of static realities. Rather it precipitates from an ever-changing racial order that "is organized and enforced by the continuity and reciprocity between the micro-level and macro-level of social relations" (67). The micro-level refers "the ways in which we understand ourselves and interact with others, the structuring of our practical activity in work and family, as citizens and as thinkers" (66-7). There may be moments of heightened insight. However, identity formation as a racial project is categorically not instantaneous.

Sorenson misses the intentionality in Paredes's decision to omit a specific scene, choosing instead to embed it through the novel and embrace it via the form of the final chapter. Almost written as a screenplay, the final chapter is nearly entirely dialogue portraying a conversation with Guálinto and his uncle. The conversation is also symbolic to the internal conversation Guálinto, (and all racialized and othered immigrants) have in identifying their place

within the United States. It represents a struggle between the divided self – part Mexican, part American. The hegemonic social strictures prevent these in-between persons, forcing them to one side of this both metaphoric and literal fence (the constructed border). Each side offers certain sociocultural and political-economic privileges and consequences. Paredes, through Guálinto, challenges the simplicity of assimilation as a unidimensional or uncritical decision.

The opening epigraph I cite from *George Washington Gómez* now deserves additional attention under this idea of self-criticality and internal conversation. Guálinto's reply, "I'd rather not go into that *again*," (302, emphasis added) challenges us to consider when and where he had this conversation before. One possibility is that Guálinto and his uncle have discussed this previously. When Guálinto was deciding whether to join the military, his uncle may have reminded him that his involvement in the U.S. military works in direct opposition to the liberation of his Tejano friends and neighbors – for it was the U.S. military (at least paramilitary) apparatus that murdered his father. Embracing the role of colonizer gives Guálinto the power and ability to feel secure, safe, and meaningful. He exacts revenge not on his father's killers but on his father himself. He rejects and resents his father's naivety in naming him George Washington, thinking that success is imminently possible for racialized beings. Guálinto shouts, when his uncle tells him the (partial) truth of his father:

> "Don't mention my father to me again! … I've heard it hundreds of times: help my people, help my people, be a great man and help my people. I'm not going to be a great man. I'll just be another Mexican…. Help my people? What for? Let them help themselves, the whole ragged lot, dirty *pelados*. I can't even help myself and you want me to help a lot of people I don't even know." (265, emphasis in original)

Another option, and one that continues more explicitly along the negotiation of self, is not that this is a repeated conversation. Rather, it is the potential dialogic version of a constant internal conflict facing Guálinto. By refraining from its actualization as a spoken discourse, he wishes to distance himself from the difficulty in justifying and convincing himself of his betrayal that he meticulously has done before. As a partial ethnic bildungsroman and *corrido*, Paredes's story necessarily interrogates the place of Guálinto as an ethnic man in the world. The question posed by his uncle is not one that Guálinto rejects considering but is instead one that has consumed his coming of age. He has already decided on an answer albeit one even he recognizes as incomplete and unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, an answer, regardless of its actual specification, is necessary for him to live a productive life.

I explore further the multicultural subjectivity that the duality of corrido and ethnic bildungsroman project on Guálinto. Throughout this final chapter, Paredes, chooses to refer to Guálinto with the pronoun "He" when as the subject and "Guálinto" or as a familial noun when as the object. However, in the last two lines of the book, Parades says, "George smiled. 'I didn't know you had a sense of humor'" (302). This switch to using the name George parallels Guálinto's own self-transformation to George – the young man who found it necessary to embrace individualism and reject cultural maintenance for success. This transformation does not occur uncritically nor seamlessly, however. The embrace of the name George is preceded by change of his middle name from Washington to Garcia, his mother's maiden name. It therefore casts doubt and adds complexity to an otherwise straightforward assimilation narrative.

In the end, I see Guálinto and David to be infinitely more complex characters than mere assimilating anti-heroes. Recall Limón's conclusion of Guálinto as a totally assimilated Mexican American. Given my above insight, Limón errs in his reading. Propelled by the realities of

racism and discrimination, Guálinto is resigned to pursue individualism and success at the expense of his culture and *su gente, su patria*. This resignation, however, is motivated by a protracted racial formation and social navigation that Guálinto has struggled with and is aware of since childhood. Guálinto's job as a spy, I argue, is a compelling, albeit sad, consequence of the structural inability for racialized bodies to succeed without conformance to hegemonic, acultural structures – not the voluntary concession thereof. This precise situation highlights the fundamental necessity to incorporate agency in acculturation strategy to elucidate the impact and affect of cultural maintenance/forfeiture in racial subjectivity. For David, these ideas are supported by Creighton in her dissertation:

> [T]he narrator increasingly foregoes interior of an exterior upward mobility that, it seems, can only be gained through adherence to approximated forms of Anglo-Saxon whiteness – the erasure of color, the shedding of accents, the Talmud, locks of hair, all preliminaries to the pursuit of safety in wealth. … [T]he brooding narrator tallies his losses against his gains; … David Levinsky's eternal deferment of the scholarly pursuits marked out for him as a beloved child so that he might, first, make a business success of himself in America. … [T]he ironic distance between the lives of the narrators and the lives of their authors offer complex critiques of the ways in which assimilationism, far from solving the problem of a divided self, can be understood to crystallize that divide between two poles: an exterior self constructed in terms of its consent to American-style capitalism; and an interior otherness in which the self's descent is objectified as an endangerment to its participation in perceived Americanness. If… Levinsky find[s himself], at last, not only safe from… pogroms but also capable of engaging in the great game of getting and spending, [he] do[es] so at the cost of self-pitying alienation. (The Bordering Nation:

Problems of American Identity in Selected Novels from 'Our Nig' to 'George Washington Gómez' 99-100)

The internal conflict as projected through desire is enlightening to an understanding of both characters. Self-pity, I argue, suggests some level the lack of agency in their otherwise chosen life paths. This understanding of agency is necessary to produce any reading on ethnic coming of age.

In continuing Creighton's critique on author/narrator similarity, I argue Parades and Cahan both project potential realities of themselves onto Guálinto and David. I should note that both Paredes and Cahan have stated they are not their characters. I do not attempt to refute that. Rather, I offer that their characters represent a localized possibility of an ethnic coming of age – one that easily could have been taken by either author. There is a fine, often nearly invisible, line separating the life paths of authors and characters, generally. These authors specifically, despite writing decades apart and across ethnic boundaries, beautifully translate the challenge of assimilation and the individual and collective struggle for success. They both, although Cahan more noticeably, leave their main characters to bathe in a swell of internal discomfort. Their stories are compelling tumultuous personal narratives that stop short of a condemnation but are still poignantly critical. Through these novels, both authors leave the Plural Society Success Question not entirely resolved. This decision is not a lack of their literary prowess but a specific realization of the genre of postmodernist realism they both explored.

Hegemony of Success, or What Capitalism (Wrongly) Teaches Us

In recognizing the non-committal answer from Cahan and Paredes, it becomes necessary to ask if perhaps the present scholarship has projected a fixed notion of success onto these authors, their works, and their characters. The archetypical notion of success – defined and

contextualized by a dominant "American Dream" and individualistic exceptionalism narrative – is rooted in capital acquisition and social and political status. However, alternative notions of success are also available within cultural groups. I draw attention to the variation between the meanings of success within the early-20th Century organization League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the mid-20th Century Chicano Movement. The former embraced assimilation, English speaking, and arguments in support of considering Mexican Americans as white (see the written briefs and oral arguments in *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947)). The Chicano movement, however, soundly rejected assimilation tendencies and appeals to whiteness. Instead, the movement centered cultural nationalism and celebration of ethnic difference. These various evaluations of success – emulation of the white Anglo-Americans and embrace of cultural maintenance – are themselves a point of discussion among ethnic communities in the process of acculturation. Nonetheless, these ideas, even if widely different, still purport a similar economic prosperity. I argue Paredes and Cahan even reject this formulation.

Both Paredes and Cahan are (arguably[4]) socialists/communists. My contention is that the post-modern non-answer to the Plural Society Success Question is employed to allow a subtle discussion on the ideas of success fundamentally – one that they would argue anti-capitalist ideas reign superior. Given the sociopolitical contexts they wrote these novels and the desire for publication to a larger English audience, they needed an alternative to directly critiquing the capitalist foundation of success. They achieved this by developing self-conscious characters that leave the readers dissatisfied despite the characters' capitalist success.

[4] Cahan's socialist identity is not in question. He is a self-described socialist and union organizer. Paredes's identity is more uncertain. However, in a personal letter, he did say that if there had been a communist party in Texas, he probably would have been a member.

Conclusion

By generalizing the Marxist National Question to a race-agnostic nationality-neutral framework – the Plural Society Success Question – I was able to draw previously unrealized similarities between *George Washington Gómez* and *The Rise of David Levinsky*. In doing so, I reevaluated the seminal critiques of *George Washington Gómez* and rejected their modernist underpinnings. The work by Joseph and Schreier on Cahan's (non-)answer to the Jewish Question elucidated a new approach to Paredes's writings on the Mexican Question. With the post-modern version, these works are then seen through the preliminary consideration of the meaning of success. This precursor illuminates the racialized differences in notions of success. Further, it enables a mutually compatible reading of Limón's and the Saldívars' critiques. The fully assimilationist narrative and the function of resistance literature become discussions on the various success constructions these novels consider. The internal struggle facing the main characters are not whether their acculturation strategy was correct but rather was the success they obtained a meaningful notion of success. The explicit struggle David has and the self-reflexive implicit one Guálinto faces highlight the discord in the nature of success more so than their approach to success. They both acknowledge their obtained success. It is the implications of this success that haunt David and Guálinto.

Their success as haunting should not be taken to imply that their racial subjectivity and gender formation is undefined. Rather, it produces intimately their identities. While literature can remain suspended between multiple possibilities, real people cannot. Cahan and Paredes, while critical, cannot condemn their titular characters. To do so would be to demand the humanly impossible from them. It is necessary for people to adopt some success notion and take steps to

actualizing it. In this process, the micro-level and macro-level influences will intersect and structure their racial and gender identity formation.

Cahan and Paredes, given the freedom of literature, hover above definiteness. Uncertain of their own success paths and coming of age, they implicitly offer anti-capitalist critiques to traditional notions of success. Through their works, they inform their respective in-group of the potentially appropriate acculturation strategy to employ by challenging the ideas of success. Of course, as Román points out, there is a consideration, which I leave for additional work, drawing about cultural production from those who have obtained upward social mobility. Given the prominent status of both Paredes and Cahan, it may be necessary to reconceptualize their respective cultural productions.

Despite the progress I made, I regret the lack of space that prevented me from investigating the role and position of female characters. An earlier draft began to develop the idea of how space – as defined by Daphne Spain – recapitulated oppression along a gendered vector. It was interesting to see the interplay of these preceding ideas and spatiality. I hope that additional scholarship can build from this Plural Society Success Question and Berry's acculturation strategies as it relates to women's coming of age and identity formation.

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