

Amexicans in Echo Park

Which part of a novel would give you a first impression of it, make you interested about it and push you to buy it finally? The answer is the title. A good title can represent most themes, and the most important theme in the novel. The book I read recently, named *The Madonnas of Echo Park* written by Brando Skyhorse, collects the voices of Mexican Americans describing their life in Los Angeles's Echo Park. Each chapter is narrated by a different character: a undocumented day laborer; a cleaning lady; an old woman; a bus driver; a retired gang member; a man just out of jail; a young lady seeking a better life; and a girl struggling with the relationship with her mother. When I first saw the title *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, it interested me, because I didn't understand what is the meaning of this title. However, as I finished this novel, Skyhorse offered a new option for this book's title *Amexican* in his lecture. I realized *Amexican* is the best title for this novel because it captures the most important theme of the novel, which is Mexican-American identity.

A good example of why I think Mexican- American identity is an important theme is the conversation between employer Mrs. Calhoun and Felicia in Chapter 2.

“‘Oh, the photo. The one with your friends. Amigos. Amigos? I am sorry my Spanish isn't better.’ Mrs. Calhoun said.

I understood this, and said, in English, ‘It's ok. My English should be better. It is America, your country.’

‘Oh, I thought you were born here,’ she said.

‘I was. But it is your country.’” (31)

In this conversation, the narrator Felicia, who is a single mother with her daughter and has a cleaning job in Mrs. Calhoun home, is trying to communicate with her new employer in English. The quotation illustrates that language can also segregate people. It is interesting to note that even though the law provides Felicia a citizenship she still didn't feel she was in her own country. She is an outsider at her home, America. As a Mexican- American, Felicia identified herself as Mexican because of her cultural background, to be more specific, her language. Thus, language, as a part of cultural performance, is not just a tool for us to communicate, but on the other hand, it caused the diverse definition of American and identity of Mexican-American. The title *Amexican* has the power to represent Felicia's Mexican- American identity which is a Mexican with American citizenship.

If Felicia is a Mexican with American citizenship, the narrator Efren in Chapter 3 represents an American struggling with his cultural Mexican identity. He rejects his Mexican identity by refusing to speak Spanish in order to appear an American. When passengers grumble about their life loudly, Efren shouted in his mind:

“These (new wetback) aren't Mexicans who've lived in this country for years, looking to legitimize a life they've worked hard to build here. They aren't even Mexicans who, from what I've learned about the Mendoza name in libraries, became Americans when the border flipped on us, vanishing years of Mexican heritage with a quill stroke, turning rich landowners into migrant settlers in a new and hostile country. No, these are country hicks, mojudos who've made no effort to assimilate, learn English, and do the hard work to become part of American society the way I did.” (77)

What Efren means is that “Wetbacks” are essentially distinct from hardworking Mexicans who've long lived in the United States. They are even distinguishable from Mexicans who abandon their heritage and settle in the country. Rather, they are stubborn and ignorant, refusing to adapt to the American society or to make an effort to strive. Efren seemed to be always trying to be American, although he is American by law. He followed all the rules to make him fit into American society. He wants to be assimilated. Just like the first chapter narrator Hector said: “I measure the land not by what I have but by what I have lost, because the more you lose, the more American you can become.” (1) Assimilation in American society pushes people to abandon their language, their food, their family so that they can be admitted from this society and find their position in their country. In this context, *Amexican* represents not only the “Mexican- American” identity of people who tied their culture with identity (like Felicia regards herself as Mexican), but also people who regard themselves as American with Mexican culture (Efren). Their American-Mexican identity is *Amexican* for them.

The old generation (like Felicia and Efren) still attempts to find a position for themselves with their

Amexican identity, yet the new generation, like the narrator Angie in Chapter 7, start trying to be someone she is not by changing Mexican ethnicity in order to get her American identity. For example, Angie and her best friend Duchess have an argument in a shopping mall.

“‘Look at their trappy clothes!’ Duchess shouted. ‘Rayon leggings with fake lace around the ankles. Flimsy baby doll dresses that come apart in the wash. Denim scrunchies you could make for a nickel. Petticoat slip dresses. And size zero jeans? White girl jeans for white girl asses!’ she shouted.

...

‘You are too good to work at the bank?’ Duchess said.

‘It is not for me, okay? There is nothing wrong with this place.’

‘You think you are better than everyone, huh?’ she said. ‘Because you are lighter than me? Because you want to live someplace nice and clean? No graffiti, no trash everywhere, no thugs hassling you just for walking down the fucking street!’” (137)

In this scene, Duchess accuses their apparel for being cheap and slutty, and regards Angie as pretentious. However, Angie wants to pursue a life which is not belonging to her. This quote demonstrates that the new Amexican generation chooses American identity over everything, and they have already been assimilated. Through the words Duchess uses to describe the clothing in store, we can notice pop culture (like Madonna) shaping American society. Angie wants to be more white and more “American”, and following pop culture seems to allow her fantasy happened. Angie represents the new generation that wants to be more American not Mexican. That leads to misunderstanding, miscommunication and conflict over generation.

Skyhorse expresses the main idea “Mexican- American identity” through generation conflict, language, the role pop culture plays in society, assimilation, their natural affinity for Mexican culture and other themes in this novel. Even though *The Madonnas of Echo Park* represents the theme of pop culture better, it doesn’t have powerful representation of other themes in this novel. Generally, the characters try to find a way to become American with Mexican blood. They are Amexican. In this way, Amexican is the better title for Skyhorse’s novel.