Perceptions of self-worth and social identity are effected by the pressures to assimilate to a culture’s customs and practices. In an article by Ruben Navarrette, Jr. about the Hispanic label of selling out, he states “it’s silly to make too much of societal pressure to assimilate, just as it’s silly for some people to put a higher premium on those who have assimilated than those who haven’t” (2). Social pressures of bicultural assimilation have an effect on the perceptions of social identity. In Luis Valdez’s play Los Vendidos, or “The Sellouts,” Valdez exaggerates Mexican stereotypes to symbolize the impact of misrepresentation. An assimilated Hispanic secretary, Miss JIM-enez, visits “Honest Sancho’s Used Mexican Lot and Mexican Curio Shop” to find a “Mexican type” in the crowd to give the impression of diversity for the Reagan administration. Salesman, Honest Sancho presents her with three stereotypical Mexican models: a revolutionary, a gangster, and a farm worker. Mexican stereotypes in Los Vendidos reveal the Hispanic perception of what makes a “good” Mexican in America. Valdez’s satirical tone in Los Vendidos appeals to both Mexican and American viewers to reveal the anxieties of being a Mexican-American facing the pressures of assimilating to Anglo culture. Los Vendidos addresses the perceived value of an assimilated Mexican, and challenges the belief that Americanism determines self-worth through the use of stereotypes and satirical comedy.

Stereotypes create broad generalizations with little validity, and justify society’s harsh judgments. Valdez’s three exaggerated characters provide insight into how Mexican-Americans feel they are viewed by Americans. Los Vendidos informs Mexicans about the dangers of accepting racial stigmas, and enlightens Anglo-American audiences about the damage that prejudice can cause. The Revolutionary’s traditional Latin lover portrayal paired with the farm
worker’s dehumanized “garden-tool” description symbolizes the feelings of objectification felt by Mexican-Americans. The model’s Mexican origin and lack of English deem them too Mexican, so they are “not good enough” for Reagan’s political purpose, so they are rejected by Miss JIM-enez. Therefore, the only way to successfully survive in Anglo culture is to become an assimilated “sellout.” American acceptance of other cultures is based off of others’ ability to assimilate to the “American way.”

The title *Los Vendidos* roughly translates to “the sell-outs.” Valdez’s message calls to his Chicano peers in hopes that they realize their need for equality and improved welfare. Valdez is not fighting the Mexican assimilation into Anglo society, but instead he is fighting the prejudice and pressure attached to maintaining a Mexican identity. Miss JIM-enez’s insistence for the Anglo pronunciation of her name, for example, symbolizes the denial of her heritage, and the place sellouts have in the naïve world of prejudice. Mexican-Americans are pressured by Anglo society to assimilate in order to gain social acceptance, even if that acceptance means denying their Mexican heritage and attempting to be as “white” as possible.

On the surface, acculturation may seem successful; however, most façades quickly malfunction. After Miss JIM-enez purchases Eric Garcia, the perfect Mexican-American, he malfunctions revealing his true Mexican roots. Eric Garcia’s Mexican-American persona represents the shell of a person who denies their cultural identity. Eric Garcia’s “error” reveals the internal confusion that stereotypes and prejudice bring, and its effect on the perceptions of self-worth. Eventually, the confusion of cultural assimilation will cause even the most acculturated to malfunction.
In an attempt to bridge the gap between Mexican and Anglo cultures, Luiz Valdez uses American-made stereotypes in *Los Vendidos* to appeal to Mexican and American audiences. Stereotypes create racial and social tensions that pressure people to assimilate for acceptance. The battle of to be or not to be Mexican is complicated by institutionalized stereotyping. An article about Mexicans’ rights in American politics by Nancy MacLean states that, once Mexicans are free from the pressures of assimilation, “Mexican-Americans [can] more freely embrace a pride in Mexicanness that they had long felt but hesitated to express politically because the risks were too great” (MacLean 130). Mexican-Americans feel their only path to social acceptance is to dismiss their ethnicity and to fade from brown to white.
Works Cited

