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Assignment One: Analyzing Children's Literature

"Hanukkah in Little Havana" is a children's book written by Julie Anna Blank and illustrated by Carlos Vélez Aguilera, aimed for children ages 4-9. The book represents the ancestry of the Ladino speaking Cuban-American community in the Little Havana neighborhood of Miami, Florida. The story is set in contemporary times and involves a young girl, Freida, and her family as they visit their grandparents to celebrate Hanukkah.

The book explores didactic themes of family traditions, cultural identity, and the importance of passing down cultural heritage. Professor Carrie Hintz defines culture as the "languages practices, traditions, rituals, and artifacts...associated with different ethnic groups" (Hintz 391-425). Blank depicts the preservation of traditions and the resilience of Jewish culture in different parts of the world. Her story follows a family from Maryland who visit their grandparents in Miami as the parents immerse their children into the world of Jewish culture in a Cuban-American community. Blank uses the Ladino word "buñuelos" to highlight how food serves as a symbol of cultural identity and a method of passing down cultural heritage. Freida makes "potato latkes" with her Nonna, causing her to feel more connected to her culture (Blank). Latkes, also being an Ashkenazi food may imply that the family holds mixed Sephardi-Ashkenazi descent. Regardless, the story implies that by learning about and embracing one's cultural background, individuals can gain a deeper sense of belonging and identity.

Although “Hanukkah in Little Havana” assumes some prior knowledge regarding certain Jewish cultural artifacts, evidenced by diction which lacks direct metalinguistic commentary, one cannot refute her pedagogical intentions. Blank implies previous knowledge of widespread cultural Cuban markers as she references “tamales” and depictions of the infamous Miami palm trees. She implicitly uses the word “dreidel,” also Ashkenazi, without transliteration thus assuming readers have a basic understanding of this cultural artifact’s relation to the cultural practices of Hanukkah. However, while she inserts certain words without metalinguistic comments, she also uses glossing to inform readers on Jewish religious artifacts. She translates the Ladino words, “ocho kandelikas para mi” to its English counterpart- “eight little candles for me” (Blank). In associating this Ladino diction with the illustration of the Menorah below the words “Happy Hanukkah,” Blank pedagogically conditions children to recognize the relationship between this critical Jewish Holiday and its cultural artifact.

Hintz and critical analyst, Eric Tribunella, describe the crucial extent to which one must examine children’s literature through a close reading of a text’s language in order to recognize didacticism and the transmission of cultural values (Hintz 27-39). The book’s didactic tone becomes prominent in Blank’s choice to include a glossary at the end, in which she not only defines the meaning of the Ladino diction, but also states in which Jewish dialect the words belong. She recognizes Yiddish as “a language originally spoken by Ashkenazi Jews” (Blank). She describes her pedagogical intentions in her author’s note in which she states her desire to write a book for children depicting the “Sephardic traditions...[and the] Ladino language...from the Cuban Jews of Miami” (Blank). Aguilera’s captivating illustrations of a dreidel and oranges on the glossary page captivate children’s attention, and the squiggly font compels readers into reading the translation of the Ladino words. While some parents reading this book for the sole

purpose of their children's entertainment may choose to ignore the glossary, it becomes difficult to avoid Blank's pedagogical goals of educating children on the Ladino dialect. Through Aguilera's illustrations and a close reading of Blank's use of diction and glossing, the book aims to capture a balance between assuming some prior knowledge, maintaining accessibility for readers familiar with Hanukkah traditions while also providing explanations and context to ensure that those less familiar can still follow and appreciate the story.

However, Blank does not limit her pedagogical tools to a simple glossary alone, as she includes an author's note. She explicitly states her intentions of writing a children's story depicting the Sephardic traditions and components of Ladino language that many typical Hanukkah books lack. She states that this story is, "for all our children, reflecting the many ways Hanukkah brings light" (Blank). This intentional blending of cultures and language mixing explains why the book involves words from both the Ashkenazi language of Yiddish, and the Sephardi language of Ladino, alluding to a strong connection to both cultures.

To fully comprehend the relationship between the cultures Blank alludes to, one must look deeper into the previous relevant migrations from Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire to Cuba. Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to Cuba began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as many Jews either sought out economic opportunities or needed to escape persecution. As Eastern European Jews settled in Cuba, they brought their Yiddish language and culture with them. Over time, as subsequent generations integrated into Cuban society, many Jewish families began to adopt Spanish and later, English as their primary languages. This shift away from Yiddish was a natural consequence of assimilation and the desire to adapt to their new surroundings. Similarly, many Sephardic Jews fled to Cuba seeking economic opportunities and religious freedom after the decline of the Ottoman Empire. They established their own

communities and synagogues in Cuba, where Ladino continued to be spoken in family and community settings (Bejarano). Like the Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe, the Sephardic Jews in Cuba gradually transitioned to speaking Spanish, the dominant language of their new homeland, which is why Ladino and Yiddish words were used in Cuban Spanish.

The book also portrays more recent migration patterns of Jewish families from Cuba to the United States- in this case, the grandparents' migration to the Little Havana neighborhood in Miami. This migration was a result of significant historical events, including the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and subsequent political changes which caused many Cuban Jews to leave their homeland for the United States. As a result of this migration, language shift occurred among Cuban Jews. While many of them retained their Jewish identity and traditions, they adapted to a new linguistic environment by learning English and, to a certain extent, integrated elements of American culture into their lives. Blank reflects this engagement with Cuban culture when the family dances a popular Latin dance, the salsa, as "Daddy's eyes tear up" (Blank). She portrays the sentimentality apparent when one passes down his heritage to his children from an intergenerational perspective.

Language shift also becomes apparent through Freida's bilingualism and her ability to navigate between English and Yiddish. The book depicts the contemporary language practices of Cuban-American Jews, who often maintain a connection to their Spanish-speaking heritage while also being fluent in English. This bilingualism is evident in the dialogues and interactions between characters in the story, as they seamlessly switch between English, Spanish, and even utilize Yiddish and Ladino loanwords, reflecting the daily life and communication practices of many Cuban-American Jewish families.

Dr. Sarah Benor describes the spectrum in which people utilize language contact ranging from codeswitching to borrowing. While it is difficult to discern to what extent Freida is fluent in Yiddish, one cannot refute how Blank primarily utilizes *loanwords*, which Dr. Benor defines as “a word or phrase from one language routinely used within another language... generally integrated into the phonological system of the matrix language” (Benor, *Hebrew Infusion*). Freida is most likely an English monolingual speaker who only holds a connection to single lexical Yiddish words as a means of connecting to her Jewish culture. From this view, Freida is most likely unable to code switch as this concept involves a bilingual speaker’s ability to translanguage and use elaborate phrases. Sara Vogel, writer for the Oxford Press explains how “translanguaging refers to how bilingual people use their linguistic repertoire to communicate in a fluid like manner” (Vogel). Freida cannot translanguage as she is arguably not bilingual. One may argue that Freida engages in intersentential code switching when she says, “Must be buñuelos day!”. However, the word “buñuelos” falls more towards the loanword category as it represents a fried pastry and a Hanukkah treat that even many non-Jewish people are aware of.

In a subsequent article, Benor also describes the role ethnolinguistic repertoires play into the spectrum of codeswitching/translanguaging and borrowing/loanwords (Benor, *Jews of Color*). Freida seems to have a limited Cuban-Jewish ethnolinguistic repertoire as she only uses widely known Ladino loanwords, primarily as kinship terms. She calls her grandparents “Nonna” and “Nonno” and also uses the term “almendrikas” (Blank). While Freida recognizes cultural markers such as the menorah and uses loanwords such as “dreidel,” it is clear Freida’s ethnolinguistic repertoire is limited to commonly used Ladino words within an English matrix language.

While the book is primarily written in English, Blank incorporates orthography for certain words, such as her use of diacritics like “ń” in “buńuelo” to accurately represent the Yiddish pronunciation. This reflects an attention to detail regarding the linguistic nuances of Freida’s speech and further adds to the pedagogical nature of Blank’s book. She also uses the alliteration of “f” in the line, “My Frieda’s still a fast filly!” to parallel the euphonic, nursery rhyme tone that embodies many children’s stories. In using these literary devices, Blank crafts an environment where children may cultivate a deeper understanding of Jewish culture in relation to Yiddish in a creative way beyond the scope of a classroom setting.

Overall, Blank utilizes components of language contact and glossing, along with Aguilera’s illustrations to depict pedagogical goals of youth engagement with Yiddish. She reflects historical patterns of Jewish migration to the United States, and maintains a light-hearted tone through literary devices including alliteration and diacritics for accuracy and reader engagement. While this children’s book may seem simple at a surface level reading, Blank and Aguilera immerse readers into the world of Jewish culture and engagement with Yiddish all while captivating the pure joy of children’s literature.

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