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From This Wicked Patch of Dust, by Sergio Troncoso

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[Teaching Guide One: Transitions to Success, Being True to Self and Culture](#)

For Discussions with Students:

All the characters in the novel change from their beginnings in Ysleta, in one way or another. Some of the characters change drastically, while others change moderately. All of them age throughout the novel: the parents become older, and the children grow up. Some of them change geographies and religions, while most of them change economic status, for the better. Some get married outside their parents' culture, while one may even have changed his morality.

Pilar and Cuauhtemoc begin dirt poor and have to move into their adobe house before it has windows, before electricity or indoor plumbing (pgs. 5-10). They work hard, focus their children on being together as a family (33-41), and build departamentos together to increase their income (51-55). Pilar finally is able to buy a Camry (122) and supplement her income with Avon. Cuauhtemoc retires early (117-121). All the children go to college. But even when Pilar and Cuauhtemoc travel to Israel, they arrive without hotel reservations (151-157): they are still not self-important, even though their economic status has improved dramatically. Pilar is a devout Catholic throughout the novel, except at the end; Cuauhtemoc remains tied to his Mexican heritage.

Before leaving for college, Julia probably benefits the most economically from her parents' economic rise (44-50). Intelligent, gregarious, and political, she travels to San Antonio, Central America, and Minnesota. Her most radical change is when Julia-Aliyah converts to Islam (112-116), and marries an Iranian and has a family in Iran (143-149, 195-202), although she finally recognizes the benefits of what her mother taught her in Ysleta.

A loner and a bookworm, Ismael (Mayello) is intelligent, and makes a great cultural change when he goes to Harvard (93-98). In Cambridge and New Haven, he questions his belief in God, becomes exposed to many different religions, and works hard to improve his English so that he can discover his literary voice (127-130). Ismael dates and marries Lilah, a Jewish woman from a well-to-do family in Massachusetts. He is conflicted about wanting and not wanting what the Kantors have achieved (131-138). Lilah's father and mother are arrogant and racist, but the children are not. In New York, Ismael is the primary parent for their son David, who learns Spanish from their nanny; Ismael becomes a writer about Ysleta (167-177).

Marcos is handsome, athletic, somewhat self-absorbed, and hard-working. He changes somewhat by leaving to study in Albuquerque, and dates an older woman who is in law school (108-110). But he returns to El Paso and becomes a teacher, a coach, and an assistant principal (123-125).

Marcos marries Lori, a blond blue-eyed beauty, and they live in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of George Dieter (138-143). But he feels dissatisfied with his life, and cheats on his wife (178-180). Marcos dies in the Iraq war, as a reservist.

Francisco (Pancho) changes the least at the beginning. Dutiful, hard-working, and shy, Francisco helps his parents with los departamentos and is only a part-time student at UTEP (51-55, 87-88, 101-105). He remains, like his mother, very Catholic. Finally in his forties he finishes college, becomes a high school teacher, and marries a Mexicana (183-186). But he rarely leaves El Paso.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Think about the changes for the family as a whole, and for each individual character. How does each of them adapt to succeed in the New World, and why in your mind do some adapt or change more than others? Is it their individual characters that allow some to change more than others? Or is it because of opportunities they have, or opportunities they seek? How different is it to adapt to the New World, when Ysleta and El Paso, Texas are the extent of the New World, versus when New York or Boston is the New World?
2. When the children (particularly Julia-Aliyah and Ismael) change and leave home for college, how do they each strive to maintain a connection to Ysleta? Why do you think they do that? Do you think they reflect about what they learned in Ysleta from their parents, something that can more easily be done outside Ysleta? Do you think all the children remain true to the culture of Ysleta, why or why not?
3. Think about fatherhood and motherhood, in Ysleta and beyond. Compare how Cuauhtemoc is as a father in Ysleta, with Marcos as a father and finally Ismael as a father. What are the similarities and what are the differences? Think about parental involvement, loving their children, discipline, and values. Why is Ismael a very different kind of father than Cuauhtemoc, and why does it work for Ismael? Now compare Pilar as a mother in Ysleta, with how Julia-Aliyah is as a mother in Iran. Again, ask the same questions for them as above. To what extent is Julia-Aliyah applying the values she learned in Ysleta from her mother to her children in Iran? To what extent is Aliyah a different mother or spouse than Pilar? Why?
4. Discuss the difficulties and successes Ismael (Mayello) has with his transitions to success. He crosses many borders in one life (economic, cultural, educational, religious, and geographic borders). How does he survive at Harvard? What Ysleta values does he use to survive in the Northeast? What new values must he adopt? Why is he tempted by what the Kantors have achieved, but why does he ultimately reject this type of 'success'? How do you think he navigates being a very different kind of father than his father? How does his spouse help him with that transition? How does his character help him to adapt?

Writing Assignments for Students:

1. For your success in school and beyond, what values or practices have you used in your life that you learned from your family? What new values or practices have you learned or adopted that were not from your family? What have been the most difficult values to learn that were not

yours to being with? What has helped you to adopt these new values? What role have friends and teachers (people not in your family) played in introducing you to a new way of doing things that is helpful?

2. As young adults in school, have you adopted some new values that sometimes clash with values from members of your family or community? How have you navigated these difficulties? Are there members of your family who have adopted your new values or practices, because they see how beneficial they have been for you? That is, are you influencing your family too? What changes do you think you will keep, even though a member of your family may not agree with these changes? Why?

3. When you cross your own borders, say going to school and returning home, or going to school and returning to the home country of your parents (or your own home country), how do you feel? Do you think you have many 'selves' because you inhabit many places that are different? Do you feel you have to deal with very different people (teachers, parents, siblings, grandparents) in different languages, with different expectations for you, with different values? Describe these different 'selves.' How do you keep them straight? That is, how do you keep from getting confused? Is there an emerging 'true self' that you can point to? Is that 'true self' a combination of what you learned from your family and what you learned on your own? Explain it as best you can. What helps you to keep making choices for this 'true self'?

4. Name the five or ten most important things that keep you true to your culture. Why are they important to you? Have you adapted them slightly, to fit your needs? Or are these values or practices exactly the same as your parents? Name certain things that you would like changed from your culture. Why would you want these values or practices to change? How have you changed them in your life? What kind of resistance do you face to these changes?

5. Have you had a friend from a very different family than yours, from a different culture, religion, ethnicity, or geography, and has this friend taught you what you thought were better practices for your life? What makes it easy to learn from someone who is at first different from you? What makes it hard to learn from someone who is different from you? Do you think you have taught this friend better values or practices from your own life and family? Have the two of you together created another culture, perhaps a hybrid culture that combines the best of two worlds? If that's the case, describe this 'third culture.'

Teaching Guide Two: Persistence, Resilience, and Adaptability of Immigrants

For Discussion with Students:

The Martinez family as a whole and its individual members display varying abilities of persistence, resilience, and adaptability as they become part of the United States. Cuauhtemoc and Pilar move their young family into an unfinished adobe house to prevent the theft of their copper pipes (pgs. 5-10). Although he doesn't know English well, Cuauhtemoc finds a job as a draftsman in El Paso and learns a new mathematical technique to calculate the movement of earth (20-21). Pilar becomes an Avon lady (44-45, 85, 122). At the beginning, they walk for miles for groceries. The boys work as cheap labor at los departamentos (51-55), which become a good source of income after many years of toil. The Martinez family saves money. The parents avoid the drug culture around them with discipline.

Another way in which Pilar and Cuauhtemoc adapt to the New World is that they allow their kids to travel (Julia to Italy and Central America, 61-64, 82-84) and they encourage their kids (perhaps reluctantly) to educate themselves, even if they have to leave home (Ismael to Harvard, Marcos to Albuquerque, Julia to San Antonio and Minnesota). Compare Pilar and Cuauhtemoc to the more traditional Mexican parents, Carlos and Lucha (64-66). Ismael uses Spanish as an advantage at Harvard (95-96).

Consider this concept of "*muy muy*," which literally means "too much too much," or "don't think so highly of yourself, don't be arrogant" (74, 104, 152). Young Ismael (Mayello) is told not to be a little Napoleon, even though he is smart and ambitious. Señora Olivas warns Francisco (Pancho) not to allow his brothers to think they are "*muy muy*" because they left El Paso to get educated. Pilar and Cuauhtemoc show up in Tel Aviv without hotel reservations (151-154) to find a good but cheap hotel, not caring how they appear to others. Compare the Martinezes ("They put us to work, and encouraged us to be tough and independent. To think for ourselves.") and the Kantors ("We were encouraged to kvetch and feel special."): 136.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does scarcity (a lack of wealth) create a culture of hard work and flexibility in the Martinez family in Ysleta? Why do you think this family reacts to their first few years in Ysleta by working together to help each other? Is it the leadership or character of the parents? Is it the young age of their children, who have no choice but to follow directions? What role does Pilar's Catholicism play in her transferring a sense of culture and discipline to her children? What role does Cuauhtemoc's Mexican pride play in giving their children a sense of self-worth? How important is the geography and demographics of El Paso, Texas (next to Mexico) versus a place like California, where they lived for only a year (19-20, 26)?
2. In their early years in Ysleta, do you think Julia gets treated differently than the boys, Francisco, Marcos, and Ismael, on matters of work for the household? Why or why not? Is it because she is a girl, or because she is the eldest child? What role do her parents' backgrounds play in how they treat their children differently? What role do the children's characters (for example, Francisco's dutiful obedience vs. Marco's independence, even selfishness) play in how they get treated differently?

3. How do you think this family ‘stays real’ with this value against becoming “*muy muy*”? Describe this value: anti-materialistic, anti-arrogance, against putting on airs, against feeling so special that you don’t want to work. How else would you describe this value? Is this a typical immigrant value? Or do some immigrants have this value, and others do not? Why is that?

How is this value an *advantage* for immigrants? How does it help them work harder than their neighbors? How does this value keep them humble? How does this value help them to focus on what matters, rather than on other superficial values? Can this value ever hurt someone who practices it? Can it lead to being happy with your lot in life, with a lack of ambition, with a negative self-worth? Why is this value sometimes an advantage, and why is it sometime a disadvantage?

Writing Assignments for Students:

1. What good values did you acquire from your immigrant parents or other family members that are beneficial to you? Culture of hard work? Focus on family? Responsibility for caring about other family members, especially the elderly or the very young? What about the value of not giving up, of working through or around problems in unconventional ways? What about the values of discipline or listening to elders? Or religious values or other values about moral behavior?

2. What values did you acquire from your parents, or values that you were exposed to, that you think are not beneficial for your life in the United States? Perhaps some of these values you did not adopt, or you struggle to adopt. Gender values, or how men treat women, and gender roles? Or how about values of obedience and silence, which do not prepare you to question authority or speak up in class? Are you comfortable arguing your point in class or in public, and so defending yourself? If you are not, is this because you may not feel your English is as good as the English of others, or because you were not taught to defend yourself orally and argue politically, or a combination of both? Why?

3. How do you pick and choose the values you keep from your parents, from your culture, while perhaps amending or even discarding other values? How do you make these choices, and how do you stay true to who you are? Are some parents more understanding than others of how you are still a part of them, yet you are also different from them, and in different circumstances? What are some values that you see around you, from fellow students, that you do not adopt because you think these practices will not help you, and may even hurt you? How do you resist social pressure to resist bad, but popular values?

4. Write about this concept of “*muy muy*.” Does it exist in your family, in a positive or a negative way? Positive: keeps you humble, keeps you from becoming arrogant, keeps you from adopting superficial values of materialism or arrogance. Negative: makes you feel worthless, with too many family put-downs without any benefit; focuses on the jealousy of the person bringing you down because you have achieved something he or she hasn’t. Do different children have different characters, and so for some the concept of “*muy muy*” may be beneficial, while for others it may be harmful?

Teaching Guide Three: Changing Gender Roles, Different Gender Roles

For Discussion with Students:

Cuauhtemoc and Pilar have traditional gender roles, with certain qualifications. Cuauhtemoc works as a draftsman (pgs. 15-24) and when he retires (117-121), that is one of the best days of his life. Pilar recognizes the burden Cuauhtemoc carries (121-123), yet she also knows he made the most important decisions on how to spend their money. Pilar takes care of the children, by taking them to school and having dinner ready for all of them. But Pilar also becomes an Avon lady (44-45, 85, 122), and defends herself from anyone who might think she doesn't work hard enough (88: "My skin is cracked and bleeding.") Also, Doña Josefina is the boss of her household, and dominates Don Pedro (2, 4, 90-92). Cuauhtemoc admires Doña Josefina.

The young children all help in the household. But Francisco (Pancho) and Marcos do much menial labor at los departamentos (51-55), from which Julia is excluded (45). Julia also gets the biggest room to herself and nicer furniture than the boys (46-47).

As adults, Ismael (Mayello) gets married to Lilah, who earns more money than he does. He teaches at a university, they have a nanny for their son David, but Ismael is also the primary parent for their son (167-177). Ismael changes more diapers than Lilah. Marcos, however, is a more traditional father/husband as an adult. He marries Lori, who takes care of Noah and Sarah and manages their household (138-143, 179-183). But he cheats on her (178-180). Compare Ismael (173-177) and Marcos (178-9) as fathers and husbands to Cuauhtemoc.

Julia-Aliyah as an adult is a more traditional mother (143-149, 198-199), but she wants her daughter Zahira to be educated and respected. Aliyah also believes she learned good parental values from her mother Pilar, even if the daughter resisted the mother at first (201). Compare Pilar's and Aliyah's gender roles in their respective families.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What affects the gender roles of Cuauhtemoc and Pilar? How important is the death of Cuauhtemoc's mother when he was eleven-years-old to how he sees women as an adult? How important is Doña Josefina as a role model, or a counter role model, for Pilar as an adult? What affect does poverty have on their gender roles, or the need to make money? How does their religion affect their gender roles? How does time, and Cuauhtemoc's deteriorating health, affect their relationship?

2. Describe the gender roles of the four children as children. What affects them? The children have different characters (Francisco: timid, yet physically strong; Ismael: intelligent and the youngest; Julia: the oldest and the only girl; Marcos: athletic, somewhat selfish, in the middle). How are their gender roles affected by their different characters? How are their gender roles affected by their individual relationships with their parents?

3. Describe the gender roles of the four children as adults. What affects them, and what changes them, if they do change? Francisco by himself in Ysleta; never leaves; marries late in life; has no children. Julia-Aliyah travels the world, more political, rejects Catholicism, adopts Islam; lives in

Iran and has children. Marcos travels for education, comes back to El Paso, marries Lori, has children, dissatisfied with job. Ismael leaves for education, doesn't come back; lives in New York, marries Lilah; becomes a writer, his dream. To what extent are their roles as spouses and parents affected by how they relate to each other?

Writing Assignments for Students:

1. What has affected your gender role at this point in your life? Your parents, what they did right, or what you see as wrong in terms of their gender roles? Your own character or independence or timidity, which are separate from the roles you see in your parents, or the roles you see with your peers? Have you ever tried to change your gender role on purpose? Say, have you ever thought of dating someone shyer than you, so that you could be more assertive, or the reverse? Do you think the gender role you are comfortable with changes over time, as you get older, or as you get more educated? Are you affected by where you are (different countries, different regions)?
2. Describe your gender role with your significant other in terms of specific events. Who pays for the meal when you go out, or do you take turns? Who drives primarily, when you are both in a car? Who talks more when you are in conversation, and who listens more? Do you go to visit him or her wherever this person lives, or does he or she come to visit you? When both of you have a conflict in schedules, does one of you usually accommodate the other? Who would you say has more of an aggressive character, and who is more passive? Would you be comfortable if he or she made more money than you did? Would he or she be comfortable if you made more money than he or she did?
3. Describe the *ideal* gender role you would want in a relationship. Describe in a sense your ideal relationship. Would both of you work? Would both of you be as educated as possible? Who would take care of the children, if you had any? Who would make more money? Who would make dinner, and who would clean the house? If your ideal is building a team that works together in a variety of situations, then how do you build that team? How do you encourage relationships built on respect, rather than power? What undermines a relationship focused on teamwork?
4. To what extent would you compromise who you are to be with the person you love? If you are Mexicano, for example, would you move to the United States? Or if you are intelligent, would you accept a role that would not allow you to achieve your full potential to be with him or her? What are the key points that you will not compromise, and what areas might you compromise for love?
5. Do you think people mimic their parents' relationship? Do you think people do the opposite of what their parents did in their relationship? Why are some people comfortable having a relationship that is very different from their parents' relationship, and others are not? If you have only one parent, how does that affect your perspective on gender roles and relationships?

Teaching Guide Four: The Choices of a Character, and the Choices for Character

For Discussion with Students:

Julia-Aliyah has many conflicts with her mother, Pilar Martinez. When Julia is a teenager in Ysleta, Pilar criticizes the friends her daughter keeps (Pilar on Elena: “But those dresses she wears! Sometimes she looks like a prostitute!” pg. 45). Julia also has a huge fight with Pilar, when the daughter misses her curfew (50-51).

Later when Julia is twenty-one and traveling in Italy with Lisa (61-64), Julia uses Lisa to get her parents to let her go to Italy, yet Julia also recognizes Lisa’s superficiality (62). Lisa makes bad choices by befriending the stranger Fernando-Fernandes and by also abandoning Julia in Italy to go out with this new boyfriend (63). When Julia is twenty-five (112-116), she calls her parents to tell them of her decision to covert to Islam, and her staunchly Catholic mother erupts in anger and tells her: “If you do this, Julia, you will be dead to me. You will no longer be my daughter.”

Finally, when Aliyah is a stay-at-home mother with three children (195-202) in Tehran, and her own daughter is sixteen-years-old (Zahira), Aliyah writes to her mother Pilar in Ysleta: “But I hope you know that what you taught me, about behaving well, respecting myself and my family, following the Word of God, all of these things are central to my life. Your teachings live on and do matter....You were right about where I was going. You were right about so many things. And you should know that.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think are the roots of Julia and Pilar’s disagreements early in the novel? Does Pilar resent that Julia has a better life in the United States, because of the sacrifices the family made in coming from Mexico to the United States? Does the teenager Julia think that the mother is applying traditional standards for being a good person (or daughter), when they are living in a more modern United States, even in Ysleta? What could some of these differing standards be? Why are they appropriate in the Old World, so to speak, and why might they not be appropriate in the New World? Do you ever go back to the home country of your parents for a visit, and do you act differently or say things in a different way there than you would in the United States? Why or why not?
2. To what extent is Julia-Aliyah like her mother, and to what extent is she different? Describe these comparisons in terms of their character, opportunities early in life, education, attitude toward work, facility with Spanish and English, travel, exposure to different religions and cultures, styles of parenting, and relationship to God.
3. Do you think Julia-Aliyah, as an adult, internalizes her mother’s teachings about morality, good choices versus superficial choices, family life, and work as togetherness? Do you think Pilar sees it that way, when she is thinking about her grown daughter? Have you ever been in a position when you decide something and you know that’s how your parents would have decided for you, but now it is you deciding that way? What are some of the practices you adopt from your parents as your own, and what are other practices you do not adopt from your parents? If you adopt only some of their practices, and not all of them, how do you get them to forgive you?

4. Why do you think Pilar accepts Lori, her daughter-in-law (138-142, 204-210) more so than her own adult daughter, Julia-Aliyah (84-88, 112-116, 125-6, 153)? To what extent is it Catholicism, or the proximity of her daughter-in-law, or Lori's background?

Writing Assignments for Students:

1. Write about an incident when a parent or grandparent applied a traditional standard (or value) to you (or your behavior) in the United States that you thought was inappropriate or out of touch with how they do things here. Why do you think the parent or grandparent thought it was appropriate? Why do you think it wasn't? Are there some standards (or values) that are right no matter where you are? Are there ways to 'adapt' traditional standards in the New World, so to speak?

2. Describe a moment when you made a decision that suddenly struck you as the kind of decision your parent or grandparent would have made. In particular look at decisions you disagreed with at a younger age, but that now you agree with as an adult. What changed your mind? Did you ever tell your parent or grandparent they were right, in a way? What do you think gives you this 'perspective' to reflect on your decisions? Time or maturity? Travel to places beyond home? Experiences with other people not your parents?

3. Describe an ongoing cultural, political, or religious conflict with a family member that has not been resolved and that bubbles up to the surface when you are together with this family member. Why do you see things differently from this family member? What prevents you (or this family member) from understanding the other's perspective? How do you deal with it, even if you can't resolve it?

4. What cultural or family values have you adapted in your life that came from your parents? How did you adapt them to your reality, which may have been very different from how your parents grew up? What values did you discard, and why?

Types of values (or topics) to consider: dating, responsibilities at home, work and ambition, religion, clothing, respecting elders vs. asking them tough questions, parenting, political participation, medicine and relationship to doctors, eating habits, technology and 'modern' appliances, language.

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