Multiplicity, Inbetweeness, and the Question of Assimilation

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What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other.

Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading.

Gloria Anzaldúa
Borderlands (19, 81)

Smelting, melting, amalgamation, Americanization, acculturation, assimilation—many words, many possible meanings, but “melting” as in “melting pot” and “assimilation” stuck. The “melting pot” was made famous by a 1908 theatrical performance, by the imagination of a Jewish immigrant; now it is no longer in vogue. “Assimilation,” however, still remains as both the desired outcome for all of those who have to leave their lands to arrive at this new home, supposedly full of promise, of opportunities, of dreams—it is what will make a precious one out of many—and also as a four-letter word that, according to some, erases our particularity and precludes the possibility of multiculturalism. Despite claims that “assimilation” is dead, in a post 9/11 environment where fear might lead to hate of the “other” within and without, this notion takes on a new skin and becomes essential in the discussion about the health, strength, and safety of the “nation.”

In the following, I would like to consider the notion of assimilation in light of a conception of selfhood that I term “multiplicitous subjectivity.” Viewing this notion of assimilation under the new light provided by current accounts of self that reject essentialism and homogenization and do justice to the complexity of the lived experience of human beings will shed light on the relevance of the concept of assimilation for our current climate of both globalization and xenophobia. In the first part of the paper, I discuss a contemporary treatment of the notion of assimilation: Eamonn Callan’s analysis of the ethics of assimilation, given the ideas of gratitude and duty. My interest in Callan’s discussion lies not merely in his explicit treatment of
the ways in which assimilation may be harmful to oneself and to others but also in what is missing from his analysis. In the second part of the paper, I highlight the multiplicitous aspect of the self and develop a conception of assimilation based on the idea that assimilation constitutes neither the erasure of oneself and thus an intrinsically bad experience nor the key to the formation of unity in difference and thus the answer to our problems about immigration. Rather, assimilation involves a multidirectional social process involving both self and group identity and the negotiation of cultural and political representations of who we are. This notion of assimilation is inextricably tied to a conception of multiplicitous subjectivity.

Perhaps, given the shifts in population in the United States as well as the ever-rising complexity of our identities due to immigration, racial mixing, geographic concentration of minorities within the nation, and globalization, the notion of assimilation should be dead—but we know better. Proponents of what I see as a reactionary nationalism continue to cherish it while proponents of multiculturalism and diversity question its value; most importantly, many of us who have left our “home” countries and find ourselves trying to figure out who we are, where we stand, where our children stand, where our children’s children will stand—who will they be?—wonder whether we have assimilated or not and whether we should or not and just what assimilation means. Thus, the question of assimilation is not merely a philosophical or political issue—it can also be a deeply personal one, integral to the quest of the good life.

### 1. The Ethics of Assimilation

The question of assimilation has again come to the fore, given recent debates about the merits of multiculturalism and immigration both in the intellectual and public arenas; we cannot ignore the heated debates about multiculturalism in various academic circles or the discussion sparked by the now-famous May 1, 2006, “A Day Without Immigrants” marches in various states of the United States. At stake is not only the well-being of immigrants (legal and illegal) in terms of their rights but also the well-being of the United States as a whole in a time of vulnerability given the 9/11 attacks and the government’s oppressive initiatives to “safeguard” the country. Interestingly, the concern about the well-being and safety of the country is translated into a concern about “unity” in the body-politic in a time of crisis. This unity, it is said, is one in which citizens (as well as long-term visitors) stand united against “evil” forces coming from outside or already here in the form of immigrants and minorities. While the current political climate has indeed highlighted the question of unity and thus the questions of the status of immigrants and their possibilities of assimilation,
there is another significant reason as to why we should be concerned with the notion of assimilation, even if it does seem to be a product of a bygone era when, according to Alba and Nee, the United States didn’t understand its multicultural nature, namely its ethical dimension, whether it constitutes a harm to oneself and/or to others.6

It is this ethical dimension of the concept on which Callan concentrates. He defines assimilation as “cultural departures or arrivals” that may be “gradual or abrupt, partial or comprehensive, ambivalent or wholehearted” (471) which should not be confused with “additive acculturation” or the ability to function in another culture without displacing a prior cultural identity (471). He takes on the question of whether assimilation constitutes a wrong or harm to the one who assimilates. He concentrates on the one who voluntarily assimilates rather than on those who are forced to assimilate as he believes that this is the less understood phenomenon—for him it is clear that those who are forced to assimilate (what he calls assimilationism) are victims of oppression. Callan concludes that voluntary assimilation does not constitute a moral wrong to others (the cultural—or racial—group to which the person might have ties) or to oneself and that it does not conflict with the social ideal of diversity as critics of assimilation contend.

A way in which assimilation can be considered a moral wrong to others, namely, those to whom we are connected in terms of culture or race, is by claiming that it breaks the duty of gratitude that we ought to have to members of that group, a gratitude-based duty akin to the gratitude-based duty we have to our parents if they have been good parents. Callan, however, shows that this argument based on gratitude is not tenable, although he says that it seems to work because of our revulsion to assimilationism. Callan’s discussion emphasizes whether a gratitude-based duty supports an “identity-conferring” commitment—that is, he asks whether such a duty entails a debt from someone of a particular ascribed racial identity to his group.

According to Callan, we could think of one being required to have gratitude to (1) a cultural community or membership (a quasi-nation) [African Americans] or (2) a group united through a morally strategic struggle [blacks]. In the case of (1), a quasi-nation, Callan concludes that no gratitude-based duty is broken if one assimilates, given that one might not have identified or participated in the particular cultural community (plus one might not be interested in preserving a distinct culture). In the case of (2), a strategic group, Callan also concludes that no gratitude-based duty is broken because members of other races/cultures may have helped in the struggle against oppression, and thus the one who assimilates is not required to have gratitude to just one race/culture (i.e., blacks) but to all of the races/cultures who fought in the oppression. Callan uses the example
of Tiger Woods and says that Woods doesn’t have an obligation to identify himself as African American. As Callan notes, “Whatever gratitude Woods might owe to those whose struggle against racism in America made his professional success possible, it creates no obligation for him to identify himself as African American” (490). In terms of the possibility of assimilation constituting a harm to oneself, given that it may damage one’s self-respect, Callan concludes that a damaged self-respect is the motive rather than the result of assimilation and thus “it would be rash to infer that we could improve the situation of the oppressed by blocking or discouraging decisions to assimilate” (496).

While there are many issues to analyze in Callan’s treatment of assimilation—his view of the relationship between racial/cultural assimilation, his view of the relationship between intergroup and intragroup solidarity—I would like to question the account of subjectivity and agency that he assumes in his analysis. Following Kathryn Gines’s lead, I take Callan to be presupposing a great deal of agency in his account of voluntary assimilation. What does it mean to “choose” to assimilate, especially if one is a member of a minority in the midst of a society in which there is a set of more or less dominant practices? Of course, here I don’t mean to say that there is a monolithic, nonvariable set of practices that are authentic or that constitute the real practices of a particular group—but simply that there are a number of accepted daily practices to which members of a group conform. Does the immigrant, newcomer, or member of a minority in the midst of a dominant majority choose to follow these practices—or does one have to follow them in order to feel more comfortable, to gain economic success, to gain social acceptance, or even to survive, thereby minimizing her sense of agency and choice?

Here we have to consider that assimilation as Callan conceives it is a complex process, dependent on a context that is not merely unidirectional—although he clearly favors examples about members of a minority assimilating to norms of a dominant group. Given the multidirectionality of assimilation, it is important to place the notion of choice in the context of a member of the dominant group who assimilates to the norms of a minority group. Perhaps in this case, we could see how one can be said to choose to assimilate. Yet even here it is not clear that there is more freedom/choice if one takes into consideration geographic assimilation—one may be a member of the dominant group who lives in a space where there is a high concentration of members of a minority group—then you may have to speak Spanish (go to Miami and see) or have salsa rather than ketchup.

It will also do us well to take into consideration Callan’s distinction between assimilation, described above as “cultural
departures or arrivals” that may be “gradual or abrupt, partial or comprehensive, ambivalent or wholehearted” and assimilationism, forcing a group to assimilate by means of oppressive, dominant forces. We can clearly conceive of different degrees of choice on the part of the person assimilating or acculturating but not on the part of the person who is a victim of assimilationism. Thus, when I question whether Callan is granting too strong a sense of agency to those who voluntarily assimilate, I don’t mean to suggest that in the end all cases of assimilation are cases of assimilationism. I also don’t mean to suggest that Callan claims that the choice to assimilate must be fully voluntary. I take it that in cases of voluntary assimilation there is a wide range in the degree of choice but two issues come to mind: (1) the pull of the social in our self-making and in our everyday experience and our practices of assimilation and (2) the kind of subjectivity at play in voluntary assimilation as described by Callan. These two issues I raise regarding Callan’s analysis do not prove that his specific argument on the ethical aspect of assimilation is wrong. Rather, they point to the complexity of the notion of assimilation vis-à-vis subjectivity and the need for a more comprehensive treatment of it.

What these two issues reveal for me is the inextricable connection between the question of assimilation and an account of subjectivity. Just as contemporary Latina theorists of color (such as María Lugones, Ofelia Schutte, Linda Martín-Alcoff, and Paula Moya), other feminists, and historical figures (such as Hegel, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Levinas) underscore the relationality between self and other—“other” not as the alien, the different, but as another member of society—it is necessary to underscore the way in which our vision of assimilation is inextricably linked to our vision of subjectivity. Thus, it is not surprising that Callan’s own analysis goes from a discussion of a gratitude-based duty to assimilate to identity-conferring commitments.

Let us revisit the first issue. While Callan is clear that he does not mean that choosing to assimilate is a fully voluntary choice, he nevertheless confers a great deal of agency to those who make the choice. To be sure, since his argument is primarily about the ethics to assimilate, his concern is that there is a choice that can be ethically evaluated, not the degree of choice. Nevertheless, both the question of the degree of choice and a careful appreciation of the ways in which “self” is shaped by the social point to an important aspect of subjectivity—the fact that despite our theoretical pretenses to autonomy, selves are subject to a wide range of social norms and practices through which they are constituted. In other words, I am who I am partly in virtue of norms and practices that I follow in my society.

Were I to move to another country or to another region of my country where there is a different dominant set of norms and
practices, it is very likely that I would experience a self or identity-questioning experience, and things would definitely become blurry, out of focus. It might feel as if I lost my ground, however shaky my previous ground was. What to do? How to survive? Do I do what they do? Do I become like them? Do I try to be one of them? In hindsight, these questions make sense—it even sounds like I have a lot of choice—but at the moment that I find myself facing the new or different circumstances, space, values, norms, I may be swayed by the normative pull of those new social practices. Many factors will influence my experience: how long I have experienced the new or different environment or culture, how lucky I get—if I land in California or Texas where as a Latina I will probably find more norms that are familiar or in Ohio and feel like I am going to freeze to death—my financial status, my educational training (Am I one of those good ones, a skilled laborer deserving of amnesty?), my class, my gender, as well as how close I feel to my homeland or home culture in the first place—we might definitely move from “Guatemala to Guatepeor.” Callan is right when he points out that we have to take particular contexts into account when dealing with the question of assimilation. We cannot and should not simply discuss assimilation in a general way or solely focus on its inherent goodness or badness. Yet I wish he had considered this point more fully in his own analysis.

Because of the variety of factors affecting my everyday experience, the degree of choice is restricted. Some of these everyday norms and practices can be thought of as being part of a background of intelligibility that makes it possible for us to carry on with our daily affairs, and thus they may even be transparent. That is, we might not be reflective or thematic about them in a traditional way. The newcomer or the member of the minority, however, might be reflective about them since they may represent very different practices from familiar ones—in this sense phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Sartre fail to do justice to the everyday experience of these people. Yet the longer I remain in my new culture/place, the more I might become accustomed to the norms and practices of the dominant group and the more transparent those practices may become, to the point that they may become part of my everyday experience. We can therefore think of one of the components in the process of assimilation as being the transparency of daily life, the incorporation of new norms and practices from the dominant culture or a minority group to the point that they become nonthematic in our experience. This is not to say that they will always be nonthematic or that I will always be nonreflective about these norms as there will be various occasions in which they will be disrupted and thus I will be more reflective about them. Moreover, although the sway of the social is strong and may play a significant role in the ways I
experience my life as an immigrant or as a member of a minority group and in the degree of choice I may have, it does not necessarily follow as Richard Rodriguez believes, that assimilation is natural and that it is inevitable, as sociologist Robert E. Park theorized. Despite the discussion above regarding the transparency of daily norms and practices, it is still a possibility, dependent on the particular context where the question of assimilation is being asked, that some norms or practices don’t become transparent regardless of the length of time spent in the new culture.

Despite possible exceptions, my main point is that due to the pull of the social the degree of choice is restricted, and thus agency is also restricted. Callan’s analysis, however, presupposes a great deal of agency on the part of the one who voluntarily assimilates. It seems to be more consistent with the liberal account of autonomous subjectivity rather than an account of multiplicitous subjectivity, which I believe does more justice to the experience of those whose lives are such that questions of assimilation are integral.

2. Multiplicitous Subjectivity and Practices of Assimilation

By multiplicitous subjectivity I mean a self that is pulled in different directions by norms, practices, beliefs, etc., of different “worlds.” I have previously referred to this self as a “world-traveler-self” that can “be-in-worlds.” Importantly, here I am using the term “world” in the sense that María Lugones uses it: “an actual society given its dominant (or non-dominant) culture’s description and construction of life,” “a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society,” “an incomplete visionary non-utopian construction of life,” or “a traditional construction of life.” By multiplicitous subjectivity, I mean a self that can be understood as being in between, in Nepantla, as being hybrid, multicultural, or mestizo—think of Gloria Anzaldúa’s vivid and powerful account of the New Mestiza and los atravesados and Velazco y Trianosky’s account of the “Nuevos Mestizos”—although here I would like to emphasize any racial or cultural mixing, not just the Spanish and Indian as mestizaje is understood in the context of Latin America. That is, multiplicity refers to the existence of two or more cultural and/or racial views/understandings/values, etc., that the individual has to negotiate, as Ofelia Schutte puts it. Moreover, the appeal to the idea of multiplicitous subjectivity does not trump the possibility that a multiplicitous subject might identify with particular racial or cultural identities. In addition, my move toward a multiplicitous subjectivity does not entail a move toward the notion of a pan-identity that minimizes solidarity or identification with a particular group.
Recall Callan’s example of Tiger Woods's disidentifying with African Americans. If we stay in Callan's narrow parameters of whether gratitude-based arguments entail an obligation not to assimilate, we can say that he rightly concludes that Tiger Woods does not have a duty of gratitude toward African Americans. Callan shows that Woods doesn’t owe special gratitude to African Americans, given that his ability to succeed is dependent on the actions of various racial groups that fought oppression and racism. Yet what is interesting to me is Woods’s claim that he is Cablinasian, a mixture of Caucasian, black, American Indian, and Asian ancestry, and his later claim that “The critical and fundamental point is that ethnic background and/or composition should NOT make a difference…. The bottom line is that I am an American ... and proud of it. That is who I am and what I am ” (Callan, 482). When Tiger Woods claims a Cablinasian identity and then prioritizes his being an American, he seems to be not only renouncing his African American identity but all identities and calling for a race-neutral society where the important thing is being one out of many in the traditional sense of the melting pot.

Callan analyzes Tiger Woods’s voluntary action to disidentify with African Americans and perhaps to assimilate into the majority as a choice made by an autonomous subject who has a great deal of freedom who does not have an obligation to be grateful to African Americans or to identify with this group. But perhaps it might be better to understand Woods's subjectivity as multiplicitous. In this particular example, this multiplicitous subject has an experience different from the immigrant who is coming from another country altogether and having to inhabit a space that is not “home,” an example with which I am much more familiar. Nevertheless Woods is multiplicitous due to his mixed racial and cultural heritage. Questions of his beliefs about his heritage, education, and understanding of his different cultures notwithstanding—I cannot presume to know this information—his disidentification with African Americans assumes an understanding of identity as a monolithic, homogeneous, nonvariable set of norms/practices. Given that as a racially mixed person he does not fit them, he doesn’t identify as an African American. It might also be the case that there is a great deal of social pressure for him not to identify as African American because of the stigmatization against African Americans that is and continues to be part of the history of race relations in the United States, a history that Velazco y Trianosky cleverly calls a bipolar disorder whereby race relations are always construed in black and white terms and black always denotes the inferior, the problem. There are many factors, then, at play in Woods's decision, and it is not clear how voluntary his decision is unless we have more information about the different variables affecting the case. For Callan, as long as there is a
Multiplicity, Inbetweeness, and the Question of Assimilation

voluntary aspect of the decision then such a decision can be ethically evaluated on his preferred notion of gratitude-based duty.

Although examining various important components of multiplicitous subjectivity may not allow us to figure out with certainty what is going on with Woods when he disidentifies with African Americans, it may shed some light on other possible ways in which we can analyze the situation of multiplicitous beings when they are at the doors of or inside the house of assimilation, thereby providing what I think would be a more comprehensive analysis that does more justice to the experience of multiplicitous subjects.

A multiplicitous subject may have a set of norms and practices from different cultures that are not consistent with each other; consequently she may experience contradictions and feel fragmented. Here we only need to recall Anzaldúa's description of the new mestiza who is described as having an intimate terrorism (20), psychic restlessness, inner war, a constant state of nepantilism (78), disruptions of the smooth flow of life or "Coatlicue states" (46), as if painful thorns were prickling her (180). One of Anzaldúa's most important contributions is to remind us that this process is not merely a political issue but a deeply personal one. "The struggle has always been inner" she says, but "is played out in the outer terrains" (87).

Anzaldúa asks, "Being a tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to" (78)?— This is a good question to ask. We know what it entails—what dangers it poses. To give in or not to the way of life, to those that in the past and even in the present wish us away, or delete us, make us invisible, see us as inferior—a Chicana faces the Spanish and the Anglo world, an African American faces the Anglo world. But for Anzaldúa, it is not a simple matter of acceptance or negation, of assimilation or nonassimilation. It is a complex matter in which one goes through struggle and may develop a new consciousness that tolerates contradiction and ambiguity (79) and an understanding that we are complex, that we will go vertically and horizontally, that sometimes we won't know where to go. It will not be as simple as saying I am just an American, and even if we do say it, that does not represent the end of the matter. That may be a decision one makes under particular circumstances, but it is not meant to completely describe who we are. Other circumstances may lead us to understand ourselves differently.

This point is not to imply that we can change identities as if they were articles of clothing—"I am now an Eskimo woman," "we are all equally marginal now." I take seriously Paula Moya's discussion of the relationship between social location and
identity, what she describes as a postpositivist, realist conception of identity that argues that social location is neither completely fixed nor completely constructed and thus there is a “non-arbitrary limit to the range of identities we can plausibly ‘construct’ or ‘choose’ for any individual in a given society.”16 I am not an Eskimo woman, despite the many years of living in cold Cleveland. We are not all marginal, no matter how oppressed we may feel; we only need to check our social location with the outside world to find that this is the case.

But even Moya’s analysis fails to do justice to the complexity of the beings she is describing as she wrongly conceives of the temporality of the multiplicitous subject as linear. She gives the example when she changed from thinking she was a “Spanish girl” to thinking of herself as a “Chicana.” She further discusses Cherrie Moraga’s experience of thinking that she was “white” to seeing herself as a “lesbian woman of color” and Angela Davis’s move to a “woman of color” identity. In these instances, Moya concludes that a truer, more accurate understanding of identity has been reached and praises the virtues of finding a true identity, of coming to a consciousness of the identity that grants a more accurate understanding of experience. While it is the case that it may make more sense to see herself as a Chicana than as a Spanish girl—there is an obvious causal connection between her self-understanding and the outside world—it does not follow that one has found the true, final identity. While some may want such an identity, and like Moya, reject fragmentation, such fragmentation is part and parcel of a multiplicitous subjectivity. Moya says, “Certainly one of the major victories to date of women of color feminism is the ability some women of color now have to conceptualize themselves as non-fragmented beings constituted neither by lack nor excess” (95). Yet, it is not a virtue if it involves a covering up or undermining of our complexity and multiplicity, which cannot be explained simply in a linear way, moving from a “less true” identity to a truer or true identity. The temporality of the multiplicitous subject, then, is not linear and does not commit us to an acceptance of a final true identity. I cannot be forced to assimilate or not to assimilate on the grounds of a truer or more authentic sense of identity.

What does a multiplicitous subject do then? Given the interrelatedness between self-formation and the social that constrains the degree of choice that one has; given the complexity of handling possible ambiguous and contradictory values, beliefs, norms or practices; and given the nonlinear temporality of our beings, we need to learn to negotiate our multiple identities in various ways. Such negotiation goes beyond identification or disidentification with the groups that play a role in our multiplicitous experience. Already, it should be understood that there is an interrelatedness between the self and other, between the individual and the group, such that whenever we ask the ques-

Mariana Ortega
Multiplicity, Inbetweeness, and the Question of Assimilation

tion of our identity, there is already an understanding of group identity as well. This doesn't mean that my understanding of my being a Latina has to agree with a particular or political or monolithic understanding of what it means to be a Latina. Rather, the point is that whenever there is a question of identity at issue, it always involves considerations of the relationship of that identity to the group. Here I recognize that the question of group identity, especially for Latinos, is quite complicated as the debates about the use of Hispanic, Latino or Cuban American, Puerto Rican American, etc., show. But this question goes beyond the scope of this essay. I will simply say that my emphasis on multiplicity and thus on mestizaje and hybridity is not meant to preclude the notions of group identity or identity politics. In the case of Latinos, this multiplicity agrees with the idea of what Linda Martín-Alcoff, following David Theo Goldberg, calls an ethno-race.

Further, I don't appeal to the mixing of races and cultures in order to promote a neutral or raceless society (“we are all mixed!”) or to launch a nationalistic project of unity such as Herman Badillo’s view of one nation, one standard (“now we are all Americans”). Rather, I wish to emphasize the nature of the complexity of multiplicitous selves. Moreover, it is not clear that given the complexity of the multiplicitous self we should choose one specific feature (i.e., race) as being the most salient. Yet we are all too familiar with the power of vision and the history of external visual features such as race and so we still need to consider, as Martín-Alcoff reminds us, the role of vision in our interpretation of racialized bodies. No matter how multiplicitous we are or we become, our habit of noticing and classifying phenotypic characteristics continues to be strong and we need to unlearn seeing with racial binoculars, we need to unlearn ascribing specific negative characteristics to specific racialized embodiment.

The negotiations of multiplicitous selves may be thought of in the same way as Callan himself describes assimilation: simple or complex, gradual or abrupt, partial or comprehensive, ambivalent or wholehearted. The work of Gloría Anzaldúa, Ofelia Schutte, and María Lugones can help us with this idea of negotiation of multiple identities. Gloría Anzaldúa uses linguistic multiplicity and narrative multiplicity to negotiate her Mexican, Spanish, Indian, and Anglo identities. She describes these negotiations as crossings. Multiplicitous selves then are border crossers who sometimes go back and forth, sometimes remain on one side, or find themselves in between. Ofelia Schutte reminds us to negotiate identities—in her case Cuban American, Hispanic, and Latina identities—in relation to the representation and political forces that mark them. And María Lugones emphasizes the multiplicitous subject’s impurity, plurality, and liminality that may be sources of resistance (Pilgrimages, 79).
Mariana Ortega

But resistance to what? Resistance to the very structures that try to simplify us and erase us from the map. Anzaldúa can help us here when she says

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through the serpent’s and the eagle’s eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a whole new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not to react. (78–79)

So the possibilities for multiplicitous selves are many. But even Anzaldúa here is too hopeful as she still desires the wound to be healed, a synthesis to be achieved, even when she describes the mestiza consciousness: “though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (80). Her own writing and desire show the inner struggle that she goes through as she both recognizes the positive, creative aspects of being a new mestiza but also sometimes desires the struggle to end. It is possible, however, that there will not be a synthesis, a healing of the wound, no matter how much we desire it or theorize about it.

3. Conclusion

Here I have not answered the issue that concerns Callan, the ethics of assimilation, whether we have an obligation to assimilate or not to assimilate. Given my view that the question of assimilation has to be considered vis-à-vis a notion of subjectivity at work, and given my account of multiplicitous subjectivity, I am not sure whether we can work out a general a priori ethical principle regarding whether we should assimilate or not. However, Callan’s analysis of the ethics of assimilation is illuminating in many ways because of what it misses. It does not consider in depth the aspects pertaining to a multiplicitous subjectivity—its contradictory and ambiguous nature; its crucial relational, social character that influences the degree of its agency; and its nonlinear temporality. I suggest that we understand assimilation as a process that is not necessarily unidirectional, although in many cases it moves toward the dominant culture/group/race, in which dominant norms and practices become transparent, habitual, and nonthematic as a result of a number of variables, including the person’s race, class, gender, physical ability, and sexuality; the degree of choice; spatial and geographic considerations; political and economic forces; and temporal considerations such as generational issues and the
nonlinearity of temporal human experience. Given the relational character of the self and the interdependence between self-conception and the pull of the social, it should be noted that the voluntary aspect of the self’s decision to assimilate or not is constrained in important ways. Anzaldúa herself, who describes the possibilities as numerous once we decide to act, and not to react, who also wants to “carve” her own self (22), says “Pero es difícil differentiating between lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto” (82)—It is difficult to differentiate between that which has been inherited, acquired, and imposed. Multiplicitous selves themselves fall prey to the forces of the social thereby giving in to practices that may pull them toward assimilation to the dominant group. What this means is that we have to remain vigilant. Already the fact that we are multiplicitous presents us with occasions in which we experience ruptures of daily life—the norms and practices of the dominant group conflict with our everyday practices—and thus we have more possibilities to carry out a reflection of the importance of these ruptures and what they mean for our sense of what I would like to call a critical identity politics.

If I am the kind of person that would like to keep ties with the different heritages that make up who I am and if I wish to remain part of a group or various groups to which I am connected by way of culture or race (understanding that these two concepts are historically and socially contingent and that there is a complex interplay between them) or by way of historical connection (as in sharing a cultural history), then, I need to be vigilant of the extent to which I follow the norms and practices of the dominant group and the extent to which those norms and practices become part of my self-identity. Different circumstances will change the degree of difficulty I may have in keeping this vigilance. While I may not necessarily have the duty to assimilate out of a sense of gratitude, there may be other reasons as to why I should or should not assimilate, including solidarity with and respect for the members of the group or groups to which I am linked by way of the factors mentioned above. But I may join the groups to which I am connected in their struggle to preserve themselves. Joining them involves a political commitment on my part, but it is not merely that. Given the intricate connection between selves and cultures, it is also a deeply personal act. Thus, I would like to end with the words of Anzaldúa that capture the complexity and the ambiguous and contradictory aspect of our multiplicity.

Raza india, Mexicana norteamericana, there's nothing more you can chop off or graft on me that will change my soul. I remain who I am, multiple and one of the herd, yet not of it. I walk on the ground of my own being browed and hardened by the ages. I am fully formed carved by the hands of the ancients, drenched with the
Mariana Ortega

The stench of today’s headlines. But my own hands whittle the final work … me. (173)

We are multiple, both belonging to herd and not belonging to it; we are the product of history and circumstances but also of our own making, not in the sense of a fully autonomous subject but of a multiplicitous self who is constantly and critically negotiating our given and chosen identities.

Notes


What then is the American, this new man? … He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. (54–55)


4 See the work of Samuel P. Huntington, *Who are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (Simon and Schuster, 2004); Patrick J. Buchanan, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* (St. Martin’s Press, 2006); and Arthur Schlessinger, *The Disuniting of America*.


7 The notion of multidirectionality is part of a new understanding of assimilation, given that early conceptions of assimilation in this country concentrated on a minority group’s movement toward the dominant or white Anglo Saxon norms.

8 A Nicaraguan saying—literally “from bad Guatemala to worst Guatemala”—indicating how one has landed in a worse situation than before.

Multiplicity, Inbetweeness, and the Question of Assimilation

10 Mariana Ortega, “‘New Mestizas,’ ‘World’-Travelers, and ‘Dasein’: Phenomenology and the Multi-voiced, Multi-cultural Self,” Hypatia 16, no. 3 (Summer 2001).


12 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).


15 See Schutte’s important criticism of the label “Hispanic” in “Negotiating Latina Identities.”

16 Paula Moya, Learning From Experience, Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 45.

17 See Schutte’s discussion of why she still considers herself a Hispanic even though in some groups Hispanics are supposed to love bullfights and eating meat and she hates bullfights and meat. Schutte, “Negotiating Latina Identities,” 67.

18 Herman Badillo, One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just Like Other Immigrant Groups (New York: Sentinel, 2006). In this book, Badillo claims that America’s immigration experiment was so successful in the past because immigrants agreed to subscribe to the three “unities of the assimilation contract: the cultural unity imposed by uncompromised English Language dominance, the civic unity imposed by the pride in being American and allegiance to the American Idea, and the unity of values imposed by adherence to the Protestant Ethic” (207). Badillo asks that Latinos, or Hispanics as he prefers to call us, follow these three unities of assimilation. See also Linda Chavez’s Out of the Barrio, Towards a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation for an equally reactionary account of what Latinos should be doing in this country.


20 I find Lugones’s understanding of complexity to be very important as she urges us to abandon the traditional binary of self–other and thus of oppressed/oppressor and to realize that all of us, from a dominant or nondominant group can occupy both the side of the oppressor or the oppressed depending the context. Once we realize this, she thinks that we are in a better position to carry out what she terms “complex communication.”

21 My view is similar to what Moya, following Juan Flores, terms “becoming asimilao,” a multidirectional, crosscultural acculturation process from which members of both subordinated and dominant groups can benefit. Being “asimilao” constitutes a “growing together” or a “cultural convergence” in which members of a group adapt to their
new cultural surroundings by retaining some of their values/cultural practices and changing others, "absorbing other ways of being in the world from among the various cultural groups they come into contact with" (128). However, as discussed in this paper, I think that Moya's vision of the self's temporality is too linear and she tries to undermine the multiplicitous character of the self.

22 We need to look at the question of assimilation beyond its connection to a gratitude-based duty. Further questions as to what other notions (solidarity, respect, recognition) confer a duty not to assimilate should be analyzed but remain beyond the scope of this paper.