

Phil 232: Linda Martín Alcoff, “Mestizo Identity”

A. LMA addressing a version of DuBois’s “double consciousness” problem, in a very different way. Distinctive racial mix in Latin America and its self-identity. Alcoff’s own experience of mixedness not being a problem in Panama but seen as shameful in U.S.; leads to Alcoff sometimes “passing” for White and so alienating herself from her own heritage.

B. 2 different kinds of racial mix discussed in the article

1. “Parental”: Parents are of two distinct racial groups (Alcoff herself) (“bi-racial”) [e.g. Barack Obama]

2. “Ancestral”: Mestizo/cholito/mulatto (Alcoff’s father): you might not know your specific ancestry but you know it is composed of different, particular racial groups, although your parents are of the same racial group.

C. Why mixed race people are or have been sometimes rejected or devalued

1. 259: by dominant group (because they lack the [alleged] purity of the dominant group)

2. 260: by subordinate groups (because they are used by dominant group to keep those groups down, or are given privileges over those groups)

D. Types of mixed identities Alcoff is discussing: Racial; Cultural [not the same thing!]

E. 261: Subordinate groups often project an image of cultural purity and rigidity. (Premium on conception of self as internally unified. Cf. DuBois)

F. 261-2: Dependence of experienced sense of selfhood on way one is seen and treated by others (cf. DuBois) (LMA: “subjectivity is relational”)

G. 263,265: Mainstream U.S. alternative to purity model—“assimilation.” Limits of US version of that:

1. Tends to be restricted to Whites (and, relatedly, is cultural, not racial—U.S. version does not advocate racial intermarriage)

(2. fluidity of white assimilation seen as sign of superiority)

3. 263-4: Limited: Mexico City & Caribbean are much more genuinely mixed than New York city

[LMA approves of “assimilation” but understands it somewhat differently from Callan, Carter, and Asante. Hers involves more of a genuine mixture (the original ideal of ‘the melting pot’) rather than just giving up an original identity for a new one.]

H. 264: “Liberal assimilationism” has morphed into “appreciation for diversity” for cultures.

[These seem like opposites, but LMA says they both retain white or Anglo-Saxon superiority.] This has the effect of projecting frozen and unchanging image of minority cultural groups, e.g. Native Americans.

I. 265-7: Difference in racial histories and current racial practices and views of assimilation in U.S. and Latin America; much more mixing in Latin America than the U.S. [demographic, settler patterns, legal regimes, levels of “civilization” of indigenous peoples, and differing Roman and German history are all part of the explanation of the differences]

J. 267: Different relationship to Enlightenment in Northern Europe vs. Southern also affected assimilation. N. Europe developed secular idea of reason, which could have been used to say that all human beings were equal, but instead said that conquered and enslaved peoples were

inferior and lacked reason, and thus deserved such treatment. (This is L. Zea's criticism: secular reason is less universal than religion)

K. Alcoff is exploring and advocating new kinds of identity and images of a healthy self that do not depend on purity, fixity, pure internal harmony [cf. DuBois]

1. 269-70: "nomad subjectivity" (Guattari and Deleuze): reject fixed identities that are tied to specific territory; image of traveling. Alcoff says this is more international capitalist transforming the world into rootless consumers; not like mixed race person with deep ties to specific communities.

[Latin American philosophers calling for critique of Western view of universalist "reason".]

2. 272-5: Alcoff does not want to abandon universal humanity and universalist ideas. But they have to take the particularity of race into account. Race has corresponded to genuine historical communities, and is part of historical experience of groups.

3. 273: mixed race persons need recognition for their mixedness; otherwise they feel a lack, a deficiency

4. 275: Need positive re-valuation of mixed-race identities. Mixed race people should not have to choose, to give up one of their identity components, or be seen as defective

a. Anzaldúa speaks to shame and rootlessness of the mestizo/a, and compensatory machismo on part of the male in relation to Native Americans, Latinos, Mexicans

b. But she sees positive aspect in border crosser as mediator, negotiator across racial and cultural borders.

i. one problem, though, is that such people can be exploited by dominant group for these skills [see C2, above], as use of Latino soldiers in invasion of Panama. Seductive attraction of that role as a way to overcome feelings of inferiority.

c. 277: Samuel Ramos's idea of assimilation that is not imitative of dominant culture but a new synthesis of all the different cultural/racial elements with none dominant

d. 277: Vasconcellos's idea of "the cosmic race" (la raza cosmica): positive identity of mixed identities, traditions, and allegiances

e. 278: This identity is never entirely comfortable in one community (Alcoff as an example) but continually works to find her place in the different communities. She lives the gap and does not seek a permanent home on one "shore." Can't bridge but can negotiate the two sides.