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# Linda Alcoff, "Mestizo Identity"

*Linda Martin Alcoff is Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at Syracuse University. Alcoff is coeditor, with Elizabeth Potter, of* Feminist Epistemologies *(1993). Also, she is the author of numerous articles that have been published in journals. In this essay, Alcoff presents an account of mixed-race identity that draws upon the philosophic literature of Latin America. She defends the idea of mestizo identity as an alternative to the standard view of the self presupposed in current policy debates.*

We Latin Americans have never been able to take our racial or cultural identity for granted:

> Who are we? asks the Liberator [Venezuelan] Simon Bolivar: ". . . we are not Europeans, we are not Indians, but a species in between. . . . we find ourselves in the difficult position of challenging the natives for title of possession, and of upholding the country that saw us born against the opposition of the invaders. . . . It is impossible to identify correctly to what human family we belong."[1]

Part European, part indigenous, half colonialist aggressor, half colonized oppressed, we have never had an unproblematic relationship to the questions of culture, identity, race, ethnicity, or even liberation. Still, Latin American thought has been structured to a great extent by European ideas about race and culture—ideas which value racial purity and cultural authenticity—and the contradiction between those ideas and Latin American reality has produced a rich tradition of philosophical work on the concept of cultural identity and its relation to the self. In a situation where there is no hope of attaining purity, a different set of practices and concepts around identity has emerged, one not without its own racisms, but

From Naomi Zack, ed., *American Mixed Race,* Rowman and Littlefield, 1995. Reprinted with permission.

1. Leopoldo Zea, "Identity: A Latin American Philosophical Problem," *The Philosophical Forum* 20 (Fall–Winter 1988–89): 37.

one that might evoke the beginnings of an alternative vision for mestizo peoples throughout the world.

This chapter is situated within Anglo-American discourses about identity and subjectivity. My aim is to contribute to new thinking about racial identity without purity for mixed-race peoples in the United States. It may be thought that there already exists in the North American context an available alternative to racial purity, that is, assimilationism and the imagery of the melting pot. I discuss this in the second section and show why I believe it to be inadequate. I then draw from the work of Latin Americans and Latino philosophers and theorists to find transformative notions of identity, authenticity, and multiculturalism that can usefully inform debates here.

## Raced Purely or Purely Erased

> Sometimes I feel like a socio-genetic experiment
> A petri-dish community's token of infection.
>
> —Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy[2]

For a variety of reasons that I explore in the next section, Spanish colonizers generally did not operate through practices of genocide, but quickly began intermarrying with indigenous people. The result is that, although there are pockets in some countries where the people are almost wholly indigenous, nearly all the Hispanics of the region share indigenous or African heritage as well. Neocolonial relations between the United States and Latin America have created the conditions to continue this practice of intermarrying (the joke in Panama today is that the most lasting effect of the U.S. invasion is to be found neither in politics nor in the drug trade but in the several hundred marriages that resulted). My own family is a typical case. Neocolonial relations between Panama and the United States created the conditions in which my cholito (mixed Spanish, Indian, and African) Panamanian father married a white Anglo-Irish woman from the United States to produce my sister and me. And through his subsequent liaisons, I have a range of siblings from black to brown to tan to freckled, spanning five countries and three continents, at last count (Panama, Costa Rica, Spain, Venezuela, and the United States). Ours is truly the postcolonial, postmodernist family, an open-ended set of indeterminate national, cultural, racial, and even linguistic allegiances.

2. Epigraph to part I: "Sociogenic Experiments," by Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy.



However, despite the normality of mestizo identity in Latin America, my own experience of my identity has been painful and at times confusing. In Panama, my sister and I were prized for our light skin. Because I was exceptionally light with auburn hair, my father named me "Linda," meaning pretty. There, the mix itself did not pose any difficulties; the issue of concern was the *nature* of the mix—lighter or darker—and we were of the appropriately valued lighter type. When my parents divorced, my sister and I moved with our mother to her parents' home in central Florida, and here the social meanings of our racial identity were wholly transformed. We were referred to as her "Latin daughters," and the fact that we were mixed made us objects of peculiarity. In the central Florida of the 1950s, a biracial system and the one-drop rule still reigned, and our mixed-race status meant that we could occupy white identity only precariously.[3] As much as was possible, we began to pass as simply white, which I was able to do more easily than my sister (she was older, darker, and spoke only Spanish at first). But for both of us, this coerced incorporation into the white Anglo community induced feelings of self-alienation, inferiority, and a strong desire to gain recognition and acceptance within the white community. It also, however, helped us to see through the Jim Crow system, for, through the experience of having racist whites unknowingly accept us, we could see all too clearly the speciousness of the biracial illusion as well as the hurtfulness and irrationality of racial hierarchies and systems of exclusion. I remember standing in the lunch line one day at school while a friend made racist remarks, feeling revolted by her attitude, and also thinking "you could be talking about me."

In cultures defined by racialized identities and divided by racial hierarchies, mixed white–nonwhite persons face an unresolvable status ambiguity. They are rejected by the dominant race as impure and therefore inferior, but also disliked by the oppressed race for their privileges of

3. Latinos in the Florida of the 1950s were generally classified as "almost white" or as "black" depending on their color. But most lived in Miami and Tampa, which were even then cosmopolitan cities very different from the "deep south" cities in north Florida and other southern states. The biggest source of ostracism for Latinos then, as now, was language. Today, the many dark-skinned Latinos who have moved to south Florida are ostracized not only by white Anglos but by African Americans as well for their use of Spanish. Anglos of all colors ridicule the sound of the language, share jokes about uncomprehending sales clerks, and commiserate across their own racial and ethnic differences about the "difficulties" of living in a bilingual city. The experience of Latinos in the United States makes it very clear that so-called racial features never operate alone to determine identity but are always mediated by language, culture, nationality, and sometimes religion.

closer association with domination. Surprisingly consistent repudiations of mixing are found across differences of social status: oppressed and dominant communities disapprove of open mixing, both fail to acknowledge and accept mixed offspring, and both value a purity for racial identity. Thus, the mixed-race person has been denied that social recognition of self that Hegel understood as necessarily constitutive of self-consciousness and full self-development.[4] For those of us who could pass, our community acceptance was always at the price of misrecognition and the troubling knowledge that our social self was grounded on a lie.[5]

Interestingly, this problem has not been restricted to a single political ideology: left and right political discourses have placed a premium on racial purity. For the right, race mixing is a form of "pollution" that requires intermittent processes of ethnic cleansing, which can take the form of genocide, segregation, or simply rural terrorism (the kind practiced by the Ku Klux Klan, the Confederate Knights of America, and the White Aryan Resistance). The very concept of "rape as genocide"—the belief that a massive transcommunity orchestrated series of rapes will result in the genocide of a culture—assumes purity as a necessary and prized cultural identity attribute. Right-wing nationalist movements have also been grounded, in some cases, on the claimed need for a separate political formation that is coextensive with a racial or ethnic identity; here the state becomes the representative of a race or ethnic group and the arbiter over questions of group inclusion.[6] The state must then make it its business to oversee the reproduction of this group, thus to engage in what Michel Foucault called bio-power, to ensure a continuation of its constituency.[7]

For the left, cultural autonomy and community integrity are held up as having an intrinsic value, resulting in mixed-race persons treated as symbols of colonial aggression or cultural dilution. The very demand for self-determination too often presupposes an authentic self, with clear, unambiguous commitments and allegiances. Thus, as Richard Rodriguez suggests sarcastically, the "Indian [has] become the mascot of an international ecology movement," but not just any Indian. "The industrial countries of the world romanticize the Indian who no longer exists [i.e., the authentic, culturally autonomous Indian without any connection to capitalist economic formations], ignoring the Indian who does—the Indian who is poised to chop down his rain forest, for example. Or the Indian who reads the *New York Times*."[8] The mythic authentic voice of the oppressed, valorized by the left, is culturally *un*changed, racially *un*mixed, and, as a matter of fact, extinct. The veneration of authenticity leads the left to disregard (when they do not scorn) the survivors of colonialism.

Thus, in many cultures today, mixed-race people are treated as the corporeal instantiation of a lack—the lack of an identity that can provide a public status. They (we) are turned away from as if from an unpleasant sight, the sight and mark of an unclean copulation, the product of a taboo, the sign of racial impurity, cultural dilution, colonial aggression, or even emasculation. Which particular attribution is chosen will reflect the particular community's cultural self-understanding and its position as dominant or subordinate. But the result is usually the same: Children with impure racial identities are treated as an unwanted reminder of something shameful or painful and are alienated (to a greater or lesser extent) from every community to which they have some claim of attachment.

Some theorists have suggested that when such a rigidity around racial identity manifests itself among oppressed people, it is the result of their internalization of oppression and acceptance of racist, self-denigrating cultural values.[9] But I am not sure that this is the cause in every case, or the whole story—the problem may be deeper, in that foundational concepts of self and identity are founded on purity, wholeness, and coherence. A self that is internally heterogeneous beyond repair or resolution becomes a candidate for pathology in a society where the integration of self is taken to be necessary for mental health. We need to reflect upon this premium put on internal coherence and racial purity and how this is manifested in Western concepts and practices of identity as a public persona as well as subjectivity as a foundational understanding of the self. We need to consider what role this preference for purity and racial sepa-

4. "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it *is* only by being acknowledged or 'recognized'." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trs. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper, 1967), p. 229.

5. For a moving and insightful literary description of this situation, see Nella Larsen's brilliant novel, *Quicksand* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

6. For example, it seems likely that the problem Israeli feminists are having in gaining acceptance for a reproductive rights agenda has to do not only with the close association between the Israeli state and Judaism, but also because the state's self-understood legitimation requires the literal reproduction of Jewish identity.

7. Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1*, trs. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980).

8. Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 6.

9. See, e.g., Maria P. P. Root, "Within, Between, and Beyond Race," in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P. P. Root (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992), pp. 3–11.

rateness has had on dominant formulations of identity and subjectivity, and what the effects might be if this preference was no longer operative.

Behind my claim that an important relationship exists between purity and racial identity is of course the presupposition that an important relationship exists between race and identity, a relationship that may not always exist but one that appears quite resistant to imminent change. Today, it is easily apparent that acceptance and status within a community are tied to one's racial identification and *identifiability*. In the United States, census forms, as well as application forms of many types, confer various sorts of benefits or resources according to racial identity, thus affecting one's social status. Less formally, one's ability to be accepted in various kinds of social circles, religious groups, and neighborhoods is tied to one's (apparent) race. And I would also argue that not only social status is affected here, but one's lived interiority as well. Such things as government benefits and employment opportunities have an effect on one's subjectivity, one's sense of oneself as a unique, individuated person and as competent, acceptable, or inferior. Dominant discourses, whether they are publically regulated and institutionalized or more amorphous and decentralized, can affect the lived experience of subjectivity. Discourses and institutions implicitly invoke selves that have specific racial identities, which are correlated to those selves' specific legal status, discursive authority, epistemic credibility, and social standing.

During the building of the Panama Canal, workers were divided and identified by the United States owned and run Panama Canal Commission as "gold" (whites) and "silver" (West Indian blacks), denoting the form of currency in which they were paid. Gold and silver workers were given separate and differently constructed living quarters, different currency for wages, and different commissaries; they were assigned different tasks and also attributed different characteristics. In Canal Commission documents, gold workers were described as loyal, earnest, responsible, self-sacrificing, and enthusiastic. Silver workers were described as shiftless, inconstant, exasperating, irresponsible, carefree, "yet as reliable a workman as our own American cottonfield hand."[10] Here race explicitly determined economic and social status, but it also was understood by the dominant white authorities to be the determinate constitutive factor of subjectivity—involving personal character traits and internal constitution (blacks were thought to be more resistant to yellow fever).[11] Such publically instituted

10. Frederic J. Haskin, *The Panama Canal* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1913), p. 162.

11. See Stephen Frenkel's Ph.D. dissertation on the construction of the "other" in the building of the Panama Canal, Syracuse University, 1992.



and circulated associations between race and subjectivity will always have an effect on the self-perceptions of those persons so described. The convincing portrait that has been drawn of subjectivity as constitutively relational by such theorists as Hegel, Fanon, and Irigaray, must persuade us that no self can withstand completely the substantive recognitions from external sources. Thus, racialized identities affect not only one's public status but one's experienced selfhood as well.

To the extent that this public and private self involves a racial construction, this self, outside of Latin America, has been constructed with a premium on purity and separation. The valorization of cultural integrity and autonomy found in diverse political orientations, from left to right, brings along with it the valorization of purity over dilution, of the authentic voice over the voice of collusion, and of autonomy over what might be called "bio-political intercourse."

## Erasures of Race

> 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 the life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.
>
> —Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, 1782[12]

If it is generally true that selves are constituted in relationship to communities that have been racially constructed, what happens when there are multiple, conflicting communities through which a self is constituted? What would a concept of the self look like that did not valorize purity and coherence? If we reject the belief that retaining group integrity is an intrinsic good, how will this affect our political goals of resisting the oppression of racialized groups?

Within the United States, assimilationism has been the primary alternative to a racial purity and separateness, but it has notoriously been restricted to European ethnicities, and it has worked to assimilate them all to a Northern European WASP norm—thus Jewish and Roman Catholic Southern Europeans were more difficult to assimilate to this norm and never quite made it into the melting pot. And of course, the melting pot failed to diminish racial hierarchies because it was never really intended to include different races; no proponent of the melting pot ideology ever promoted miscegenation.[13]

12. Quoted in John Hope Franklin, *Race and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 321–2.

13. See Franklin, *Race and History*.

Moreover, as Homi Bhabha remarks, "Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and a unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition."[14] The fluidity of cultural identity promoted by the assimilationist discourse actually was used to bolster Northern European–Americans' claims to cultural superiority: Their (supposed) "fluidity" was contrasted with and presented as a higher cultural achievement than the (supposed) fixity and rigidity of colonized cultures. Here, fixity symbolized inferiority and flexibility symbolized superiority (although of course, in reality, the designation of "fixity" meant simply the inability or unwillingness to conform to the Northern European norm). This paradox of the meaning of fixity explains how it was possible that, simultaneous to the Panama Canal Commission's construction of rigid racial groups working on the Canal, the ideology at home (i.e., the United States) was dominated by the melting pot imagery. The WASPS could be fluid, tolerant, and evolving, but the natives could not. The very fluidity of identity that one might think would break down hierarchies was used to justify them. Given this, a prima facie danger exists in drawing on assimilationist rhetoric, as it was espoused in the United States, to reconfigure relations of domination.

Ironically, the fact of the matter is that throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, a true melting pot of peoples, cultures, and races was created unlike anything north of the border. The liberal, modernist-based vision of assimilation succeeded best in the premodernist, Roman Catholic, Iberian-influenced countries, while the proponents of secularism and modernism to the north were too busy to notice. Rodriguez points out that, still today,

> Mexico City is modern in ways that "multiracial," ethnically "diverse" New York is not yet. Mexico City is centuries more modern than racially "pure," provincial Tokyo. . . . Mexico is the capital of modernity, for in the sixteenth century, . . . Mexico initiated the task of the twenty-first century—the renewal of the old, the known world, through miscegenation. Mexico carries the idea of a round world to its biological conclusion.[15]

Today, the liberalism that spawned assimilationism has metamorphosed into an ethic of appreciation for the diversity of cultures. In the name of preserving cultural diversity, and in the secret hope of appropriating native wisdom and the stimulation that only exotica can provide a consumption-weary middle class, indigenous cultures and peoples are

14. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 66.
15. Rodriguez, pp. 24–25.



commodified, fetishized and fossilized as standing outside of history and social evolution (if they are not totally different than "us," then they will not be exotic enough to have commodity value). Thus, an image of the American Indian straddling a snowmobile (as appeared in the *Times*) evokes affected protestations from educated Anglos about the tragic demise of a cultural identity, as if American Indian identity can only exist where it is pure, unsullied, fixed in time and place.[16] The project of "protecting" the cultural "integrity" of indigenous peoples in the guise of cultural appreciation secures a sense of superiority for those who see their own cultures as dynamic and evolving. Anglo culture can grow and improve through what it learns from "native" cultures, and thus the natives are prized for an exchange value that is dependent on their stagnation.

In North America, then, assimilationism and its heir apparent, cultural appreciation, have not led to a true mixing of races or cultures, or to an end to the relations of domination between cultures. However, interestingly, the concept and the practice of assimilation resonates very differently in South and Central America. As I discuss in the third section of this chapter, for Mexican philosophers such as Samuel Ramos and Leopoldo Zea, assimilation did not require conformity to a dominant norm; instead, assimilation was associated with an antixenophobic cosmopolitanism that sought to integrate diverse elements into a new formation.

What can account for the different practices and theories of assimilation in North and South cultures? And what were the elements involved in U.S. assimilationism that allowed it to coexist with racism rather than come into conflict with it? Finding the answer to such questions can be instructive for the project of developing a better alternative to identify constructions than those based on racial purity. Toward this, I have already suggested that assimilationism in the North was organized around an implicit normative identity (WASP) to which others were expected to conform; hence its exclusive application to Northern Europeans. And I have also suggested that the flexibility of identity claimed by assimilationists was used to bolster WASP claims to cultural superiority over the supposedly rigid peoples and cultures that could not be made to conform. I offer two further elements toward such an answer, one taken from cultural history and the other involving the Enlightenment concept of secular reason.

Latin American and North American countries have different cultural genealogies based on the different origins of their immigrants: respectively, Roman Catholic Iberia and Germano-Protestant England. In North

16. Rodriguez, p. 6.

America, race mixing generally was perceived with abhorrence. In the countries colonized by Spain, by contrast, "elaborate racial taxonomies gained official recognition from the outset . . . and these casta designations became distinct identities unto themselves, with legal rights as well as disabilities attaching to each."[17] After independence, the casta system was eliminated from official discourses, and racial discrimination was made illegal, because such practices of discrimination obviously could not work in countries where as few as 5 percent of the population were *not* mestizo of some varied racial combination.

According to Carlos Fernández and the historian A. Castro, this contrast in the practices around racial difference can be accounted for in the historical differences between "Nordic" and "Latin" cultures.

> Due primarily to its imperial character, the Roman world of which Spain (Hispania) was an integral part developed over time a multiethnically tolerant culture, a culture virtually devoid of xenophobia. The Romans typically absorbed the cultures as well as the territories of the peoples they conquered. Outstanding among their cultural acquisitions were the Greek tradition and, later, the Judaic tradition. It was the Roman co-optation of Judaic Christianity that the Spanish inherited as Catholicism.[18]

Thus, in the missionary zeal of the Spanish Christians can be found the spirit of Roman imperialism, as well as its cosmopolitanism.

By contrast, the Germanic peoples of Northern Europe "emerged into history at the margins of the Roman empire, constantly at war with the legions, not fully conquered or assimilated into Roman life." Fernández hypothesizes that this "condition of perpetual resistance against an alien power and culture" produced the generally negative attitude of the Germans toward foreigners, especially because the Roman legions with which they fought included numerous ethnic groups. This attitude had profound historical results: "The persistence of the German peoples, born of their struggles against the Romans, can also be seen later in history as an important element in the Protestant schism with Rome accomplished by the German Martin Luther. It is no coincidence that Protestantism is primarily a phenomenon of Northwestern Europe while Catholicism is mainly associated with Southern Europe."[19]

Now this of course is not the whole story as to why genocide was so widespread in North America and not in the South: "The difference in

17. Carlos A. Fernández, "La Raza and the Melting Pot: A Comparative Look at Multiethnicity," in Root, p. 135.

18. Fernández, p. 135.

19. Fernández, p. 136.



the size and nature of the Native American populations in Anglo and Latin America also helps account for the emergence of different attitudes about race."[20] In the North, the indigenous peoples were generally nomadic and seminomadic, not very numerous, and there was a great technological distance between them and the European settlers; in the South, the indigenous peoples were numerous and "lived a settled, advanced (even by European standards) agricultural life with large cities and developed class systems."[21] So the resultant integrations between race and cultural formations that developed differently in the North and the South were the product not just of different European traditions but also their interaction with the different cultures in the New World.

And certainly Roman imperialism was not less oppressive than Germanic forms of domination; both perpetrated a strategy of domination. But it is instructive to note the different forms domination can take, and the different legacies each form has yielded in the present. In the North, the melting pot stopped at the border of German-Anglo ethnicities. To venture beyond that border endangered their incorporation into a Roman superpower, ethnically and racially diverse but centered always in Rome. Thus, for Nordic peoples, assimilation and cultural integrity were posed in conflict, and to maintain the distinctness of their borders, they were willing to commit sweeping annihilations. For Rome and Hispania, however, assimilation meant expansion, development, growth. Cultural supremacy did not require isolationism or separation but precisely the constant absorption and blending of difference into an ever larger, more complex, heterogeneous whole. Border control was thus not the highest priority or even considered an intrinsic good. This is why the concept of assimilationism has never had the same meaning in the South as it has in the North, either conceptually or in practice.

The second part of the story involves the Enlightenment concept of secular reason. The northern variant of assimilationism was strongly tied to the development of a Liberal antifeudal ideology that espoused humanism against the aristocracy and secularism against the fusion of church and civil society. The Enlightenment in Northern Europe put forward a vision of universal humanism with equality and civil freedoms for all citizens of a secular state. Diverse ethnicities and religious allegiances could coexist and unite under the auspices of a larger community founded on natural law, and that natural law could be discerned through the use of secular reason, which was conceived as the common denominator across cultural differences. Thus, reason became the means through which the Nordic

20. Fernández, p. 136.

21. Fernández, p. 137.

immigrants to America could relax their borders enough to create a new ethnically mixed society.

But why was the banner of reason incapable of expanding beyond WASP communities? To understand this it helps to recall that the European Enlightenment was flourishing at exactly the same time that European countries were most successfully colonizing the globe – exploiting, enslaving, and in some cases eliminating indigenous populations.[22] But what can account for this juxtaposition between the invocations of liberty for all and the callous disregard of the liberty as well as well-being of non-Europeans? To answer this we need to look more critically at what grounded the claims to liberty.

Universalist humanism was based on a supposedly innate but unevenly developed capacity to reason, a reason conceptualized as entirely mental and thus capable of transcending the particularities of material contexts and specific individuals. Leopoldo Zea has written about the political uses that colonialism has made of the Western notion of reason.[23] Where the Frankfurt School analyzed the connection between Enlightenment reason and social domination, Zea provides a piece of the analysis noticeably missing from their account: the connection between reason and colonialism. "The marginalization of non-European peoples with respect to Europeans," Zea argues, "is related to a Eurocentric view of reason, which leads to the perception that non-Western people are inferior to Europeans in their capacity to reason, hence, in their status of human beings. Political questions of autonomy and the right of self-governance hang in the balance."[24] Universal standards and articulations of rationality are implicated in socially organized practices and institutions that implement colonial and neocolonial policies. When the paradigm of reason, construed as culturally neutral, is defined as the scientific practices of European-based countries, the result is a flattering contrast between Europe and its colonies. Reason is counterposed to ignorance, philosophies of mind to folk psychologies, religion to superstition, and history to myth, producing a cultural hierarchy that vindicates colonialist arrogance. And because this hierarchy is justified through a concept that is presented as culturally neutral, it cannot be assailed by political arguments nor can it be identified

22. Just as feminist historians have countered the usual assessment of the Renaissance, arguing that in this period women's situation actually worsened and so there was no renaissance for women, so it has been argued that the Enlightenment offered nothing for those peoples of the world newly colonized. These epoch-dividing categories reflected the perspectives of the dominant.

23. Quoted in Ofelia Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993), p. 86.

24. Ibid.



as an intellectual product of a particular culture. Thus its political effects become unassailable. Following this, Zea points out that the issue of identity must not be mistakenly thought to have relevance only within a conceptual or cultural realm. "It is a problem located in the public sector —in the public conception of reason and in the use of power."[25]

The capacity for reasoning and science on the Western model requires an ability to detach oneself, to be objective, to subdue one's own passionate attachments and emotions. Such a personality type was associated with Northern Europeans and contrasted with the passionate natures of Latin temperaments and the inferior intellects of darker peoples. Thus a humanism based on secular reason, far from conflicting with racism and cultural chauvinism, supported their continuation. In its most benign form, reason could only support Europe's role as beneficent teacher for the backward Other, but could never sustain a relationship of equality. It is for this reason that Zea concludes,

> The racial mestizahe that did not bother the Iberian conquerors and colonizers was to disturb greatly the creators of the new empires of America, Asia, and Africa. Christianity blessed the unity of men and cultures regardless of race, more a function of their ability to be Christian. But modern civilization stressed racial purity, the having or lacking of particular habits and customs proper to a specific type of racial and cultural humanity.[26]

Thus, secularization actually promoted racial purity by replacing Christian values with culturally specific habits and customs. In challenging what is still a powerful orthodoxy—the claim that secularization has only progressive effects—Zea's critique of modernism strikes more deeply than even much of postmodernism. To pretend that these existing concepts—of reason, of philosophy, and of religion—can be extracted from their cultural history and purged of their racial associations and racial content is a delusion. Reason, it turns out, is white, at least in its specific articulations in Western canonical discourses. Therefore, an account of the core of human nature that is based on a reasoning capacity is a racialized concept of the self *passing* for a universal one.

Given this history, then, it is no longer a surprise that the concept and practice of assimilationism that developed in this Northern European context sought to maintain its borders against the devouring capacities and polluting effects of other cultures, and to unite its diverse ethnic groups on the basis of a criterion that simultaneously excluded others (i.e., the capacity for reason and science in the mode of Northern Europe). Whether the concept of reason can be reconstructed is not my project

25. Ibid.

26. Zea, "Identity: A Latin American Philosophical Problem," p. 37.

here, though I certainly support such a project. Rather my question here is, can the concept of assimilation be transformed and salvaged? This discussion will begin in the final section of this chapter.

But first, I want to look briefly at one other, more current, alternative to conceptions of identity based on purity—the very recently developed notion of nomad subjectivity in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.[27] This concept is not analogous to assimilationism in being widely disseminated within dominant cultural discourses, but it is influential in many academic, theoretical circles and it gains support from some formulations of the new global world over. Nomad subjectivity announces that fluidity and indeterminateness will break up racial and cultural hierarchies that inflict oppression and subordination. Freed from state-imposed structures of identity by the indeterminate flows of capital, nomad subjectivity deterritorializes toward becoming like "a nomad, an immigrant, and a gypsy."[28] Within language, as within subjectivity,

> There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their lines of escape. . . . Instead, it is now a question of a becoming that includes the maximum of difference as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier. . . .[29]

The flow of deterritorialization does not move between points but "has abandoned points, coordinates, and measure, like a drunken boat. . . ."[30] Deterritorializations thus have the effect of deconstructing racial and morphological identity categories along with national, cultural, and ethnic ones, and so the result is not a multiply situated subject but a nomadic subject without the concreteness implied by situation.

This sort of view obviously connects more generally to a postmodernist notion of the indeterminate self, a self defined only by its negation of or

27. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trs. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); *Anti Oedipus*, trs. Robert Hurley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); and *A Thousand Plateaus*, trs. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For a critique, see Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse," *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1987):187–98.

28. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 19.

29. Ibid., p. 22.

30. *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 296.



resistance to categories of identity.[31] And there is a strand of this in academic feminism among theorists who repudiate identity-based politics in the name of antiessentialism. Liberation is associated with the refusal to be characterized, described, or classified, and the only true strategy of resistance can be one of negation, a kind of permanent revolution on the metaphysical front. Unfortunately, nomadic subjectivity works no better than assimilationist doctrine to interpellate mixed identity: the nomad self is bounded to no community and represents an absence of identity rather than a multiply entangled and engaged identity. This is not the situation of mixed-race peoples who have deep (even if problematic) ties to specific communities; to be a free-floating unbound variable is not the same as being multiply categorized and ostracized by specific racial communities. It strikes me that the postmodern nomadic vision fits far better the multinational CEO with fax machine and cellular phone in hand who is bound to, or by, no national agenda, tax structure, cultural boundary, or geographical border. And what this suggests is that a simplistic promotion of fluidity will not suffice.

I am concerned with the way in which a refusal of identity might be useful for the purposes of the current global market. The project of global capitalism is to transform the whole world into postcolonial consumers and producers of goods in an acultural world commodity market, the Benetton-like vision where the only visible differences are those that can be commodified and sold. Somewhere between that vision and the vision of a purist identity construction that requires intermittent ethnic cleansing we must develop a different alternative, an alternative which can offer a normative reconstruction of raced-identity applicable to mixed-race peoples.

## Mestiza Race

> Jose Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color—la primera raza sintesis del globo. He called it a cosmic race, la raza cosmica, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan. . . . his theory is one of inclusivity.
>
> —Gloria Anzaldúa[32]

31. See, e.g., Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). See also my review of this book in *American Literary History* (Summer 1993): 335–46.

32. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), p. 77.

We must begin to look South, where there already exists a long tradition of philosophical work on the intersections of identity, multiplicity, and politics. The specifically philosophical treatment of identity will certainly seem odd to Anglo philosophers, who on the whole leave such cultural specificities to sociologists or anthropologists, and instead prefer to concentrate on problems considered to have universal relevance and applicability. I am reminded here of a story that Michael Kimmel told recently at a talk he gave. As a graduate student in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California–Santa Cruz, he was taking a seminar in feminist theory when a debate occurred about the importance of race versus gender. In the midst of the discussion, bell hooks asked Bettina Aptheker what she saw when she looked in the mirror. Aptheker replied, "I see a woman." hooks responded that when she looked in the mirror, she saw a black woman. Kimmel reported feeling very uncomfortable at that moment, because he realized that when he looked in the mirror, what he saw was a human being. When your own particular and specific attributes are dominant *and* valorized, they can be taken for granted and ignored.

Because of their interest in contributing to the thinking about identity issues, many Latin American philosophers have developed a different understanding of the nature of philosophy itself. If philosophy is defined as raising only universal, general, and abstract problems, beyond the issues facing concrete individuals in the everyday world, there is no space within philosophy for discussions about cultural identity, and so such issues are left to the social sciences. Zea argues that such a view exemplifies the desire to be godlike on the part of philosophers, to transcend the "concrete capacity of vision of the one who asks."[33] Drawing on the views of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl-Otto Apel, Zea suggests that we need not abandon theoretical discourse to reject this delimitation of philosophical problems to abstract and universal issues:

> At stake here is not a choice [e.g., between theory and practice] but a reconstruction of problems that are inescapably linked among themselves because they have an origin in man. The philosopher does not have to give up being a philosopher to face the many problems of a reality different from theory. Without ceasing to be a philosopher he can philosophically, rationally, confront man's daily problems and seek possible solutions.[34]

So, without ceasing to be a philosopher, let me return to the problem of racial identity.

33. Zea, "Identity: A Latin American Philosophical Problem," pp. 33–34.
34. Ibid., p. 34.



First, it seems clear that, within the context of racially based and organized systems of oppression, racial identity will continue to be a salient internal and external component of identity. Systems of oppression, segregated communities, and practices of discrimination create a collective experience and a shared history for a racialized grouping. It is that shared experience and history, more than any physiological or morphological features, that cements the community and creates connections with others along racial lines. And that history cannot be deconstructed by new scientific accounts that dispute the characterization of race as a natural kind.[35] Accounts of race as a social and historical identity, though this brings in elements that are temporally contingent and mutable, will probably prove to have more persistence than accounts of race that tie it to biology. Ironically, history will probably have more permanence than biology.

Moreover, I would argue that, given current social conditions, any materialist account of the self must take into account the element of race. This is not to deny that generic and universalist concepts of human being are both possible and necessary. Despite my concern expressed in the last section against formulating a universal humanism based on reason, connections do exist between persons that endure across differences of sexuality, race, culture, even class. My view is not that such connections do not exist, or that they are trivial, or that in all cases a universalist humanism is politically pernicious. However, if we restrict a philosophical analysis of identity and subjectivity to only those elements that can be universally applied, our resulting account will be too thin to do much philosophical work. In the concrete everydayness of "actually existing" human life, the variabilities of racial designation mediate experience in ways we are just beginning to recognize.

Another reason to maintain the racial dimension of formulations of identity is that universalist pretensions often produce alienation in those whose identities are not dominant. When such false universalisms become influential in oppressed communities, the result is that, for example, nonwhite peoples internalize the perspective of white identity. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison dramatically captures this phenomenon for the young black child who wants blond hair and blue eyes. Simone de Beauvoir and Sandra Bartky have written about a form of female alienation in which women see themselves and their bodies through a generalized male gaze that rates and ranks attributes, and disciplines behavior to a degree worthy

35. See Naomi Zack, "Race and Philosophic Meaning," in *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 94, no. 1 (Fall 1994), pp. 14–20.

of Foucault's description of the Benthamite panopticon. And Samuel Ramos has argued that the veneration of Europe has led Mexicans to live "with a view of the world alien to their own cultural reality," in effect, "to live outside their 'being.'"[36]

Such patterns of alienation have profound effects on the capacity for self-knowledge, a capacity that philosophers as diverse as Plato and Hegel have seen as critical for the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever. If knowledge represents a concrete vision correlated to a particular social location, then the alienation one suffers from one's own perspectival vision will have ramifications throughout one's life. And for mixed-race persons, this problem can be particularly difficult to overcome. For them (us), it is not a question of reorienting perspective from the alien to the familiar, because no ready-made, available perspective captures their contradictory experience. Without a social recognition of mixed identity, the mixed-race person is told to choose one or another perspective. This creates not only alienation, but the sensation of having a mode of being that is an incessant, unrecoverable lack and an unsurpassable inferiority. This blocks the possibility of self-knowledge. The epistemic authority and credibility that accrue to nearly everyone, at least with respect to their "ownmost" perspective, is denied to the mixed-race person. Vis-à-vis each community or social location to which she or he might claim a connection, she or he can never claim authority to speak unproblematically for or from that position. Ramos warns that, without a connection to an ongoing history and community, "one lives only for the day . . . without regard to past or future."[37] Only communities have continuity beyond individual life; cast off from all communities, the individual has no historical identity, and thus is unlikely to value the community's future.

Identity is not, of course, monopolized by race, nor does race operate on identity as an autonomous determinant. Mixed-race persons probably notice more than others the extent to which "race" is a social construction, ontologically dependent on a host of contextual factors. The meanings of both race and such things as skin color are mediated by language, religion, nationality, and culture, to produce a racialized identity. As a result, a single individual's racial identity can change across communities, and a family's race can change across history. In the Dominican Republic, "black" is defined as Haitian, and dark-skinned Dominicans do not self-identify as black but as dark Indians or mestizos. Coming to the United States, Dominicans "become" black by the dominant standards. In the United States, I generally pass as a white angla; as soon as I land in

36. Schutte, *Cultural Identity*, p. 75.

37. Ibid., p. 77.



Panama, I am recognized as Panamanian. In England, South Asians are identified as blacks. Every year in South Africa, numbers of people petition the government to change their official racial classification, resulting in odd official announcements from the Home Affairs Minister that, for example, "nine whites became coloured, 506 coloureds became white, two whites became Malay . . . 40 coloreds became black, 666 blacks became coloured, 87 coloreds became Indian. . . ."[38] The point here is not that racial identities are often misidentified, but that race does not stand alone; race identity is mediated by other factors, political as well as sociological ones. And appearance is also socially mediated; the dominant perspective in the United States on a person's racial identity or whether they "look" Latino or black is not natural. Appearances "appear" differently across cultural contexts.

Because nationality, culture, and language are so critical to identity, some propose that, for example, nationality should be taken as a more important distinguishing characteristic than race. Nationality could provide a strong connection across racialized communities, increasing their unity and sympathetic relationships. This phenomenon is emerging in the United States today as minority communities become antiimmigrant, even when the immigrants are of the same racial features or share a cultural background. Thus African-American school kids fight with West Indians in Brooklyn, and Cubans disdain the Central Americans flooding into Miami. Such conflict is sometimes based on class, but it is also based on a claim to the so-called "American" identity. In this way, U.S. minorities can ally with the (still) powerful white majority against new immigrants, and perhaps share in the feeling if not the reality of dominance. An identification that places nationality over race thus ensures, at least for the present, an increase in antiimmigrant violence.

The point of the preceding discussion is to suggest that race cannot and should not be eliminated as a salient identity in the near future. In my view, it should not be replaced by nationality, and its erasure only conceals the ongoing dominance of white Northern European values and perspectives. Some have argued that, given the socially constructed character of race, and the largely detrimental effects that racial classifications have had on all nonwhite peoples and mixed-race persons in particular, all forms of racial identity should be rejected. I would argue rather for developing a positive reconstruction of mixed-race identity. I will end by suggesting some ways this might be developed.

38. Quoted in Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 73. Notice that, as she points out, no whites applied to become black.

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa has offered a powerful and lyrical vision of the difficulties mixed-race persons endure. She writes:

> The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness.[39]

Contrast that description with Deleuze and Guattari's romantic portrait of the nomad and the schizophrenic, as a paradigm of liberation.

Anzaldúa worries that the shame and rootlessness of the mestizo can lead to excessive compensation, especially in the form of machismo. She writes:

> In the Gringo world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from a racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame . . . which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them.[40]

For Anzaldúa, an alternative positive articulation of mestiza consciousness and identity must be developed to provide some degree of coherence and to avoid the incessant cultural collisions or violent compensations that result from the shame and frustration of self-negation.

Toward this, Anzaldúa sees the mixed-race person as engaged in the valuable though often exhausting role of border crosser, negotiator, and mediator between races, and sometimes also between cultures, nations, and linguistic communities. The mixed person is a traveler often within her own home or neighborhood, translating and negotiating the diversity of meanings, practices, and forms of life. This vision provides a positive alternative to the mixed-race person's usual representation as lack or as the tragically alienated figure.

Such figures who can negotiate between cultures have of course been notoriously useful for the dominant, who can use them to better understand and thus control their colonized subjects. Thus, such figures as Malinche and Pocahontas are often reviled for their cooperation with

39. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 78.

40. Ibid., p. 83.



dominant communities and their love for specific individuals from those communities. There is no question that such border negotiation can exacerbate oppression. Today large numbers of bilingual and biracial individuals are recruited by the U.S. military and the F.B.I. to infiltrate suspected gangs or communities and countries designated as U.S. enemies. To my dismay, many Latinos in the U.S. military were deployed in the invasion of Panama. Here again, an allegiance based on nationality is used to circumvent what might be a stronger racial or cultural tie.

I suspect that for mixed-raced persons, especially those who have suffered some degree of rejection from the communities to which they have some attachment, such jobs hold a seductive attraction as a way to overcome feelings of inferiority and to find advantage for the first time in the situation of being mixed. Where I agree with Anzaldúa is the positive spin she puts on the mixed-race identity. (And I must say to Anglos who may have read her book, don't underestimate the radical nature of what she has done: her use of a mix of languages, including English, Spanish, Tex-Mex, and indigenous languages, is a practice that is reviled by most Spanish speaking people in the United States and Latin America, even including most Mexican Americans. Her insistence on linguistic mixes is very liberating.) But where I would place a note of caution concerns the uses to which such border crossings can be put: they are not all to the good.

Another element worth exploring is Samuel Ramos's concept of an assimilation that does not demand conformity to the dominant or consist in a kind of imitation. Rather, assimilation in Ramos's sense is an incorporation or absorption of different elements. This is similar to the Hegelian concept of sublation in the sense of a synthesis that does not simply unite differences but develops them into a higher and better formulation. In the context of Latin America, Ramos called for a new self-integration that would appropriate its European and Indian elements. "The practice of imitating European culture must be replaced by the assimilation of such a culture. 'Between the process of imitation and that of assimilation there lies the same difference,' he notes, 'as there is between what is mechanical and what is organic.'"[41] Ramos believes that this process of active assimilation cannot occur without reflective self-knowledge. An imitative stance toward the other, and a conformity to dominant norms, will occur unless the empty self-image of the Mexican is replaced by a more substantive perspective indexed to one's own cultural, political, and racial location.

I believe that the concept of mestizo consciousness and identity can contribute toward the development of such a perspective, by creating a

41. Schutte, *Cultural Identity*, p. 80.

linguistic, public, socially affirmed identity for mixed-race persons. Mestizo consciousness is a double vision, a conscious articulation of mixed identity, allegiances, and traditions. As I quote Anzaldúa above, Jose Vasconcelos called this new identity the cosmic race, la raza cosmica, based on a rich inclusivity and mutability rather than purity. All forms of racial mixes could be included in this identity, thus avoiding the elaborate divisions that a proliferation of specific mixed identities could produce. Such a vision is not captured by the "United Colors of Benetton," but by the organic integration of a new human blend such as the world has never seen.

Only recently have I finally come to some acceptance of my ambiguous identity. I am not simply white nor simply Latina, and the gap that exists between my two identities—indeed, my two families—a gap that is cultural, racial, linguistic, and national, feels too wide and deep for me to span. I cannot bridge the gap, so I negotiate it, standing at one point here, and then there, moving between locations as events or other people's responses propel me. I never reach shore: I never wholly occupy either the Angla or the Latina identity. Paradoxically, in white society I feel my Latinness, in Latin society I feel my whiteness, as that which is left out, an invisible present, sometimes as intrusive as an elephant in the room and sometimes more as a pulled thread that alters the design of my fabricated self. Peace has come for me by living that gap, and no longer seeking some permanent home onshore. What I seek now is no longer a home, but perhaps a lighthouse, that might illuminate this place in which I live, for myself as much as for others.