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The Ambiguity of Assimilation

Commentary on Eamonn Callan's, "The Ethics of Assimilation."

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Eamonn Callan's essay "The Ethics of Assimilation" could be read as a defense of assimilation, or at least a defense of voluntary assimilation. As I see it, the guiding impetus of the essay is to make the case that voluntary assimilation is ethically acceptable (does not do wrong to others or to the self) whereas, forced assimilation and coercion *not* to assimilate are or could be unethical (wrong or harmful to others or to the self). Such a defense places Callan in the company of philosophers like Bernard Boxill who claims that black people do not have a duty to self-segregate, that the questions of self-segregation and assimilation pose no dilemma, and furthermore that compulsory racial segregation

is unjust (Boxill 1992, 183-184).¹ Or, more recently, Tommie Shelby who asserts that while blacks have a right to cultural autonomy, it is also the case that "those blacks who do not desire this form of group self-determination are free to cultivate an alternative cultural identity, even to assimilate completely to white culture" (Shelby 2005, 168). I find myself persuaded (by Boxill, Shelby, and Callan) that, outside of defensive ends, a member of a racial and/or cultural group may not have a duty to self-segregate and/or not to assimilate. And although I agree with this central argument, there are some ideas and distinctions presented by Callan that I would like to examine more closely.

Callan's defense of assimilation attempts to address four main concerns: 1) gratitude-based arguments, 2) the charge of complicity, 3) the loss of self-respect, and 4) the issue of multicultural education for African American children. While Callan differentiates between assimilation and other relevant terms like additive acculturation, assimilationism, and racial disidentification, the key term in question (i.e. assimilation) remains, perhaps intentionally, ambiguous. In the following response, I highlight a few of the central features of assimilation outlined by Callan. With regard to his analysis, I am particularly interested in the ambiguity of assimilation, the relationship between race and culture (or racial assimilation and cultural assimilation), and finally the relationship between assimilation, assimilationism, and complicity.

In describing assimilation as ambiguous, I mean simply that the term is fraught with uncertainty and is capable of being interpreted in multiple ways. Callan offers his clearest account of assimilation at the very beginning of the essay when it is described as "cultural departures and arrivals" or

¹Boxill is making his case in light of arguments about race and racial duties posed by W.E.B. Du Bois.

“to leave the culture in which [one] grew up and live in another” (471). But this suggests that assimilation is tied to a literal (or figurative) space or location rather than a specific set of behaviors or a way of life. Further into the essay, Callan considers the possibility that membership in a culture can be construed as an ascribed social role or ensemble of roles and in this case, “assimilation is an abandonment of that social role or roles and whatever special moral responsibilities go with them” (479).

Callan also elaborates on the possible meanings of assimilation when he notes carefully that what counts as assimilation (i.e. “leaving” one cultural community and “joining” another) varies according to the boundaries of the imagined communities in question (472). The idea that assimilation (and questions concerning the ethics of assimilation) may be interpreted in a variety of ways arises again in Callan’s analysis of gratitude, filial duty, and cultural fidelity. Here Callan asserts, “there is no conceptual gap between the supposed duty to avoid assimilation and a duty to avoid *what cultural insiders take to be assimilation*” (481, my emphasis).²

While addressing the ambiguity of assimilation, another matter to be considered is the relationship between race/racial assimilation and culture/cultural assimilation for Callan. After describing duties of cultural fidelity as

²Callan does not cite Paul Gilroy in this essay, but the term “cultural insider” also brings to mind work by Gilroy for whom culture, ethnicity, and nationality are all interconnected. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy, referencing Werner Sollors’ *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), asserts that the essential trademark of cultural insiderism is “an absolute sense of ethnic difference” that is prioritized “over all other dimensions of [one’s] social and historical experience” (Gilroy 1993, 3). Callan’s analysis and defense of assimilation suggests that he might agree with Gilroy’s critique of cultural insiderism.

degrading and even repugnant, Callan asserts that the central motivation for charges of “cultural betrayal” may be something other than *cultural* identity. This quickly leads to a discussion of *racial* identity in which it is unclear to me what connection Callan sees between race and culture or racial assimilation and cultural assimilation. He offers a very clear and helpful distinction between people who regard race as something that “properly recedes” with the end of racism and those who value race beyond strategies against racism and for whom “the imagined community is cherished in part as an end in itself, a source of belonging and direction in people’s lives whose value would persist beyond the end of racism” (485). But then Callan creates a false dichotomy between racial and interracial solidarity. He assumes that one would have to reject racial solidarity if one were in favor of interracial solidarity; however, the two forms of solidarity do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, it must be made clear that one’s position on retaining or rejecting racial identities may not parallel one’s position about cultural identities. There are races that are multicultural and cultures that are multiracial. As Boxill notes, “it is not possible to draw the substantive inference that every black American shares a culture” (Boxill 1992, 178). Shelby explains that “not all persons designated as *racially* black self-identify as *culturally* black” (Shelby 2005, 167). He adds that blacks “...are an ethnically and culturally diverse group” (Shelby 2005, 231). Perhaps this is a point that Callan was attempting to raise with the example of Tiger Woods, but I wonder if (for Callan) the ethics of racial assimilation are the same as the ethics of cultural assimilation.

A pertinent example of the ambiguity of cultural versus racial assimilation in conjunction with the problem of cultural insiderism is given by Linda Alcoff in *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Alcoff quotes (and I also quote at length for the sake of clarity) from an editor’s report in *Race Traitor*:

A *Journal of the New Abolitionism*, part of which reads as follows:

...Several female students at North Newton Junior-Senior High School near Morocco, Indiana, who call themselves “Free to Be Me” group, recently started braiding their hair in dreadlocks and wearing baggy jeans and combat boots, a style identified with Hip-Hop culture. Morocco is a small farming community seventy miles south of Chicago; of the 850 students at the school, two are black. Whites in the town accuse the group of “acting black,” and male students have reacted by calling them names, spitting at them, punching and pushing them into lockers, and threatening them with further violence...(Alcoff 2005, 213-214)³

What might be going on here? Several possibilities come to mind, but one that stands out is the name of the group. These white female students call themselves “Free to Be Me,” signifying that they simply want to be free to be themselves, not free to assimilate or to be “like” someone else. This example is all the more significant when we consider the various “boundaries” that are being crossed (including racial, cultural, gender, and perhaps also boundaries of sexuality).

For the purposes of this response, I am interested in overlapping perceptions about culture and race alongside perceptions about gender and sexuality. In retelling these events at an Indiana high school, Hip Hop culture is coded as black, representing Hip Hop culture interpreted as “acting black.”⁴ But the choice of dress, including baggy jeans and

³In this example, Alcoff is analyzing the journal *Race Traitor* as a representation of radical white antiracism.

⁴I say Hip Hop is coded as black and not that Hip Hop is black because Hip Hop is a racially, ethnically, and (inter)nationally diverse culture. See *That's the Joint: A Hip Hop Studies Reader* and *New York Ricans in the Hip Hop Zone*. While some may interpret

combat boots, adds the element of gender crossing. These girls are not only considered to be “acting black” but also “acting masculine.” Add to this the fact that it is an all female group and the members’ sexuality is possibly also being called into question. On the one hand, the “Free to Be Me” group members perhaps represent a danger to whiteness (a form of amalgamation or symbolic miscegenation). On the other hand, the members of this group may represent a threat to white-heterosexual-femaleness. It is also significant that the male students of this community assume the role of *insiders* who are policing various borders and responding with violence and threats of violence. With all that is at work in this example, I think that it provides a richer and more inclusive representation of what Callan describes as cultural insiders’ *perceptions* of assimilation.

Another noteworthy point is the fact that “cultural insiders” are not only in the culture from which one might assimilate, but in the culture to which one might assimilate as well. Callan acknowledges this point when he explains that historically African Americans’ subordination did not allow an avenue for assimilation (498). It is possible for a member of a culture to be snubbed or even outcast for assimilation (away) from her culture and yet still be rejected by the culture to which she desires to assimilate. In such a case, would the individual be rendered cultureless? Where is the agency of the individual who voluntarily chooses to assimilate? Can one simply choose one’s culture or is culture sometimes assigned or determined from the outside? The idea of voluntary assimilation suggests a lot of agency, but the role of cultural insiders policing imaginary cultural borders poses a limit to such agency. On this point one could call into

these white female students as appropriating black culture (see bell hooks’ *Black Looks* on the issue of appropriation or “eating the other”), Alcoff describes this as “a repudiation of white identity” (Alcoff 2005, 214).

question who “owns” certain cultural characteristics. Boxill rejects the idea of cultural ownership in his response to James’ Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village.” Boxill asserts that there is a fallacy behind “the assumption that people own cultures...If the use or enjoyment of an object or idea by many different people causes a loss to someone, he may sensibly, and sometimes justifiably, claim ownership of it. But this does not apply to culture or the process of cultural assimilation” (Boxill 1992,182).

The final distinction on which I will concentrate is the one Callan emphasizes between assimilation and assimilationism. He describes assimilationism (based on scholarship by Bikhu Parekh) as occurring “whenever a dominant social group appeals to the superiority of its culture as the license for its domination and seeks to entrench its power through the selective assimilation of outsiders” (472). Callan insists that the goodness or badness of assimilation should not be measured by the oppressive character of assimilationism (472). And if assimilationism is associated with cultural genocide, Callan rhetorically asks if voluntary assimilation might be cultural suicide. He replies that the answer is “very obviously no” but some may disagree. In “Racial Progress and Adjustment” Alain Locke argues that the process of an “alien” group assimilating to a “dominant” group cannot be stopped by the dominant group. He adds that “it is invariably the alien group that has the final choice” but also warns, “it will be costly, [because,] for example, the alien group may be committing social suicide” (Locke, 94).

For Callan, the charge of complicity in one’s own oppression is perhaps more important than the question of cultural genocide or suicide. Callan rejects the notion that voluntary assimilation is the same as being complicit with the oppression of assimilationism. Setting up two extremes – assimilating under the threat of death versus assimilating with “milder” consequences – Callan suggests that the more

coercion involved in assimilation the less room there is for the charge of complicity. He states:

The more one moves toward the coercive end of the assimilationist continuum, the less room there can be justly to accuse someone who assimilates of complicity in assimilationism because *coercion diminishes their responsibility* for what they do. The more one moves toward the other pole of the continuum, the more room opens up for assimilation to occur for *honorable reasons*, (493, my emphasis).

There are two problems that I want to highlight here. One is the idea that coercion diminishes responsibility. Although coercion may possibly decrease the validity of the charge of complicity, it does not follow that coercion *diminishes* responsibility. The other is the language of honor. Callan’s idea of “honorable reasons” for assimilation emphasizes motivations or intentions without regard for consequences.

In addition to these issues, Callan does not adequately account for intersectionality of social or cultural variables, including (but not limited to) sex, gender, and religion in his account of assimilation. An example of this shortcoming may be illustrated by Frantz Fanon’s “Algeria Unveiled” - the first chapter of *A Dying Colonialism*. Fanon begins with an analysis of the relationship between traditions of dress and the uniqueness of societies and cultures. He explains that in Algeria traditional garments demarcate cultural differences as well as sexual difference and asserts that since the veil was such a strong representation of Arab society, it became the first target of attack by the colonialist (or if you prefer assimilationist) administration. Fanon discerns that the colonialist administration is not at all invested in improving the status of Algerian women; their only interest is in attacking this representation of Algerian culture in an effort to westernize the culture itself. Destroying the veil became

symbolic of destroying Algerian culture and values and replacing them with European colonial “values.”

According to Fanon the function of the veil, and Algerian women themselves, undergoes various transitions and transformations under Western colonial development and during the Algerian resistance to colonial domination. Before French colonialism, the veil represented a rigid separation of the sexes. Although colonialism attacked the veil, many women continued to wear the veil as a form of resistance to France’s unveiling of Algeria. As women became more directly involved in the fight for liberation, many of them took off the veil to give the *false* impression of their assimilation to Western values (Fanon 1959, 58). But when the French become suspicious of everyone, the veil is taken up again to conceal packages from the occupier (Fanon 1959, 61).

To tie this to Callan’s analysis, one might ask whether the Algerian women who removed their veils in the colonial context were assimilating and/or being complicit with assimilationist and colonialist oppression. Callan’s claim that “the conjunction of assimilation and assimilationist pressures is not enough to warrant the charge of complicity” is not entirely helpful here (476). What is complex about this example is the aforementioned intersectionality of variables for Algerian women with regard to the veil. For example, some Algerian women may have thought the veil to be oppressive or symbolic of subordination independent of colonialism or assimilationism. In this case, the removal of the veil may not have been an act of assimilation, but rather an act of resistance. Fanon celebrates women who removed the veil and those who took up the veil as acts of resistance to colonial power. But what can be said about the woman who removed the veil as an act of resistance to her own culture or to her own subordination within that culture? This resistance may be inaccurately described as a form of assimilation or as

complicity with assimilationist pressures. For Callan, it seems that a woman might voluntarily assimilate to the occupying culture and still avoid the charge of being complicit with the oppression of assimilationism. But what about the woman who resists pressures within her culture with no desire to assimilate to the dominating culture? Perhaps this example is outside the scope of Callan’s analysis.

As I stated in the beginning of this response, I read Callan’s essay as a defense of assimilation. I can see why such a defense is appealing, particularly to members of racial and/or cultural groups who see their membership as strategic rather than what Callan calls “quasi-national.” However, in an academic and political climate that emphasizes the social construction and unrealness of race (and by extension racism), many members of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups find themselves having to defend their *non*-assimilation, whether for strategic or quasi-national purposes. For this reason, I appreciate the project outlined by Linda Alcoff in “Real Identities” (from *Visible Identities*) which “aims to explain why the willful attachment to raced or sexed identities, identities created in conditions of oppression, is *not* necessarily pathological” (Alcoff 2005, 87). Thus a defense of voluntary assimilation should not allow us to lose sight of the fact that there is still an ethics of voluntary *non*-assimilation.

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