The Ethics of Assimilation*

Eamonn Callan

I

The choice or unchosen fate of many people is to leave the culture in
which they grew up and live in another. These paired cultural departures
and arrivals may be gradual or abrupt, partial or comprehensive, am-
bivalent or wholehearted. "Assimilation" is the word we use to name
them. They are not to be confused with so-called additive acculturation,
in which the ability to function in another culture is added to our
repertoire of skills without displacing our prior cultural identity.[1] That
might give us the best of both worlds. Still, new and old cultural ties
cannot always be coherently or comfortably combined. Sometimes the
one who embraces the new wants nothing of the old, or the price of
embracing the new is rejection by those who cleave to the old. And so
assimilation continues to shape many of our lives.

    The muddled interpenetration of so many of our cultural practices
in our world makes it doubtful in a great many cases whether something
is to be counted as assimilation or not. Cultural mixing has always been
a powerful influence on human lives, even if the vanity of nationalism
and kindred attitudes has tended to promote illusions of cultural purity.
But the pace and pervasiveness of recent globalization make that illusion
harder to sustain than ever before. The decision to assimilate and other
lifestyle choices become much harder to distinguish in that world, and
so we might even wonder whether the concept of assimilation has out-

    1. Margaret Gibson, *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American
High School* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 189–90.

lived its usefulness. What checks that skeptical thought is the sheer resilience of the human interest in sustaining old or forging new common identities. So long as that interest exists, those who care about a particular identity they share with others will fret about the conditions under which it is forfeited. If an Egyptian immigrant to the United States gives up Islam to become an Episcopalian, would that be assimilation? Would the case be any different if she joined a Coptic congregation instead? These questions are idle if you are indifferent to the possibility of a shared Arab or Egyptian American identity. But if you care about that possibility, you must care about how the questions are answered.

What is counted as assimilation or not in these cases depends on the boundaries of those imagined communities to which labels such as "Arab American" or "Egyptian American" are affixed. No one literally polices such boundaries, even though many metaphorically do so. The boundaries are drawn according to the variable imaginings of self-styled insiders in conditions of cultural flux and hybridity. So we should expect a lack of agreement about when one "leaves" the cultural community to "join" another and a corresponding lack of clarity about how disagreements might ever be resolved. Yet the point I want to emphasize is this. When the boundaries are drawn to express some emotionally charged distinction between "us" and "them," even quite small decisions can be invested with the heavy symbolic weight of assimilation—the beginning of a new friendship, a shift in one's accent, the decision to send one's children to this school rather than that. That small differences could carry such a weight of meaning would be absurd if cultures were quasi-discrete systems of meaning. But in a world of promiscuous cultural mixing, where the urge to differentiate "us" from "them" does not abate, fertile ground will be found for the tribalism of small differences.

Assimilation is not to be confused with assimilationism, which occurs 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.[2] People leave the culture in which they grew up for countless reasons: out of economic hardship, personal ambition or greed, to marry someone or to avoid marriage with someone else, to answer a religious calling or to escape what they have come to see as mere superstition, to pursue or avoid a particular kind of education, and so on. The many motives that lead to assimilation can be reinforced by assimilationist influences. But it would be extravagant to suppose that that must always be so. Therefore, nothing about

2. Bikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7.

the badness or goodness of assimilation in general can be inferred from the oppressive character of assimilationism: too much will depend on why the assimilation occurred in the particular case and the consequences that follow from its occurrence. That banal fact is commonly obscured in recent discussion in the United States, where a zealous critique of assimilationism is liable to slide into the blanket indictment of assimilation.[3] "The word [assimilation] seems to conjure up a bygone era, when the multicultural nature of American society was not comprehended, let alone respected, and there appeared, at least to white Americans, to be a unitary and unquestioned American way of life."[4] That time has passed, even if some Americans continue to behave as if it had not. Yet whether its passing has made assimilation into nothing more than a noxious historical residue from a time when America was less congenial to multiculturalism is another matter.

Consider for a moment the widely used but little considered metaphor for what is sometimes the intended outcome of assimilationist policies: cultural genocide. The metaphor suggests that coercive assimilation is tantamount to cultural murder. Fair enough. But is it also true that voluntary assimilation is an instance of cultural suicide? Is assimilation a terrible thing, like death, regardless of the reasons it comes about? Should we try to dissuade prospective assimilators as if they were would-be perpetrators of suicide? I would think that the answer to these questions is very obviously no, though the metaphor of cultural genocide might reasonably be taken to suggest otherwise. More is at stake here than the infelicity of an overused metaphor. The ethical standing of assimilation is a critical consideration in how we develop policy in education and immigration, and, to the extent that its standing is enveloped in a fog of moral antipathy, no one's interests are well served.[5]

3. Even when the distinction is made, its importance can be overlooked. Parekh is among the more conceptually careful advocates of multiculturalism, and the index to *Rethinking Multiculturalism* has separate entries for assimilation and assimilationism. But at no point in the book does he consider the possibility of assimilation without assimilationism.

4. Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1. On the demise of what Alba and Nee call "the bygone era" of complacency regarding assimilation and American cultural unity, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 327–42.

5. If "fog of moral antipathy" sounds hyperbolic, one might consider how one legal scholar, writing in one of the more exalted academic venues, has recently described assimilation as "that insidious cousin of totalitarianism"; see Nomi Stolzenberg, "He Drew a Circle That Shut Me Out: Indoctrination and the Paradox of Assimilation," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1995): 582. The normally sober Alan Wolfe depicts assimilation as "a form of symbolic violence. Like the actual violence of war, assimilation is disruptive and heartless, the stuff of tragedy." See *An Intellectual in Public* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 11.

Besides its widespread conflation with assimilationism, the other big obstacle to understanding the ethics of assimilation is its supposed conflict with the social ideal of diversity. So far as cultural minorities are absorbed into a monolithic cultural mainstream, sameness trumps difference, and, therefore, a wholesome regard for diversity has been taken to require a wholesale rejection of assimilation.[6] But if the preservation of established cultural differences is one way in which diversity is sustained against the pull toward homogeneity, another is cultural innovation, spurred in many instances by creative adaptation to new circumstances. Assimilation may frequently be at odds with the first of these processes, but it is also often a catalyst for the second. Those who enter a new culture may be as apt to diversify that culture as to passively adjust to it. Indeed, recent critics of the model of "one-way" assimilation that dominated American social science until fairly recently have shown that that is just what immigrants to the United States have commonly done.[7] Of course, the possibility of the newly assimilated diversifying the receiving culture depends on the extent to which that culture welcomes or at least tolerates innovation, and in many cases that might not be much. But the point cuts both ways: the culture from which the individual assimilates might impose a stifling uniformity that no true friend of diversity could view with approval.

A more interesting concern about assimilation that is sometimes championed under the banner of diversity has to do with the end of cultural communities of long standing. Obvious examples are the steep demographic decline of British Jews, say, or the disappearance of particular native American tribes. To the extent that cultures die off as a consequence of assimilationism, that is obviously to be deplored. But even when the assimilation has other sources, it still seems too cavalier to say that the imminent end of the culture need not trouble us at all because those who depart might diversify the cultures with which they now identify. If we continue to be troubled by this, as I think we should, I suspect that our intuitions derive from a source that has nothing to do with diversity per se. A culture that has survived over many generations is a complex human creation whose very durability is strong presumptive evidence of the goodness of the lives it has made possible for at least many of its members, and the strength of the evidence is that much greater so far as it has survived when the option of assimilation

6. Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 157.
7. Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream*, 4–6.

was available to all.[8] If that option now attracts so many that the end of the culture is imminent, a proper reverence for the products of human creativity will sadden us. The destruction of a fine painting will sadden us for the same reason. The point here is not that more diversity is better than less but that many products of collective as well as individual human creativity bear an intrinsic value that is not fungible. The painting that was destroyed may have been covered by an insurance policy that makes possible the commission of another work of art, and those who assimilated from a declining culture may go on to live good lives in another. Yet these fortunate outcomes do not mean that the destruction of the painting or the culture is other than an irreparable loss. Thus if someone assimilates from a cultural community in advanced decline, the decision might betray a disregard for the value of what her decision erodes, and that would perhaps warrant reproach. Nevertheless, even a full recognition of the value that is forfeited does not necessarily require a decision to stay. For I might vividly appreciate the value of the declining culture in which I grew up and still feel unbearably stifled by living within it.

The upshot of all this is that assimilation has to be evaluated with a close eye to the variable contexts in which it occurs. But agreement on that point does not get us far. There may still be considerations that often tell against it in contextually sensitive evaluation. These widely (though not universally) applicable objections would presumably go some substantial way toward justifying the general ethical suspicions that assimilation arouses nowadays, even if due sensitivity to context would show that the suspicions are sometimes unwarranted. I want to investigate just that possibility.

Assimilation can give rise to ethical criticism of the one who assimilates, as well as of others who have some role in its occurrence. By "ethical" criticism I mean to include both wrong done to others and to the self. (If the idea of self-inflicted wrong does not sit well with you, all I have to say about that can be readily translated into the language of self-inflicted harm.) My exclusive focus is on ethical criticism of the one who assimilates rather than others who influence that outcome. That focus is not meant to suggest that this is the more important problem of the two; I only claim that it is less well understood. People who assimilate to escape exploitation or coercion are plainly victims of oppression. But to see them as oppressed, we only need to appreciate the evil of the exploitation and coercion, which is not particularly hard. What is more elusive is the ethical standing of more or less voluntary

---

8. That a culture makes possible good lives for many of its members is consistent with its making good lives impossible for other members. Limiting opportunities to assimilate out of the culture will likely be necessary to keep its oppressed members in their place.

decisions to assimilate, and its very elusiveness makes it worth thinking about.

In the category of wrong done to others, assimilation is sometimes taken to signify betrayal of the cultural community that one forsakes. The charge of betrayal might charitably be interpreted in at least a couple of ways. The first is a variation on the ancient argument that political obligation arises from the gratitude we owe to the state by virtue of the benefits we have enjoyed by living under its laws. The argument, developed in Plato's *Crito*, is supposed to work through an analogy between political and filial obligation, and it has been widely discredited, at least in its ancient form.[9] But its particular weaknesses do not rule out the general thesis that cleaving to an ascribed social role that in part defines one's identity can have a compelling ethical justification in the claims of gratitude. These claims remain a powerful current in ordinary moral thinking, and they yield particularistic obligations of the kind that must be vindicated if decisions to assimilate are ever to warrant ethical reproach. They also have the considerable advantage of being compatible with the essentially egalitarian character of a morality to which much talk of loyalty and betrayal cannot be easily reconciled. Adult filial duty is my paradigm case. I am careful to frame that case in a way that avoids any anachronistic claims about duties of filial obedience of the kind that Plato invoked. Another plausible candidate in the category of gratitude-based moral roles is membership in a racially defined practice or association that is thought to be strategically necessary to combat racial oppression. Such membership is easily confused with cultural identity, and gratitude-based arguments for its moral hold on particular individuals may appear to have merit even when the charge of cultural betrayal does not. Nevertheless, I argue that neither gratitude-based argument against assimilation or against repudiation of a racially ascribed role in resisting racial oppression is tenable. The second way we might interpret the charge of cultural betrayal applies only against the background of assimilationist pressures. That background can make it appear as if the decision to assimilate is tantamount to complicity in the oppression that assimilationism entails. But the appearance is deceptive: the conjunction of assimilation and assimilationist pressures is not sufficient to warrant the charge of complicity.

In the category of wrong done to the self, I want to consider assimilation as a loss of self-respect. That topic is closely connected with

9. Plato's argument is criticized in A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). An intriguing contemporary version of the argument that avoids the obvious failings in Plato's is A. D. M. Walker, "Obligations of Gratitude and Political Obligation," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 18 (1989): 359–64.

assimilationism. The logic of assimilationism requires the stigmatization of people identified with the dominated culture or cultures; that is one implication of exalting the dominant culture over others. A society in which assimilationism has been widely practiced thus harbors powerful incentives to assimilate that appeal to a damaged self-image. That said, I shall argue that even in these unpropitious circumstances a damaged self-respect cannot be inferred from the decision to assimilate without further warrant.

In the final section of the article, I consider briefly what light my argument might shed on the vexed issue of multicultural education for African American children. I distinguish between two things that such an education might encompass. The first of these, which I call "quasi-nation building," is a distinctive endeavor for black Americans though it lacks a compelling civic rationale; the second, which I call "counter-stigmatization," is a civic imperative for all future citizens, regardless of race. I also warn against ways in which the first of these endeavors may inadvertently operate so as to thwart the success of the second.

II

A revealing analogy to the ethical criticism that assimilation may provoke is the charge of failing to be a good (adult) son or daughter. The analogy is helpful because the claims of filial duty and virtue are vivid to many of us for whom the pull of cultural belonging is fainter, and, to that extent, the analogy can help to make morally intelligible what might otherwise seem senseless. My claims about filial morality are dogmatic; I shall not even try to defend them. I hope they have enough intuitive appeal to be broadly though perhaps far from universally acceptable.[10]

The parent of young children and the adult child of aging parents have partly symmetrical moral responsibilities. When parents have capably performed their role during the years of childhood, we expect morally good adult children to be grateful for the benefits of love and care that their parents have given them. They owe a debt of gratitude to their parents. The debt is discharged by reciprocating love and care without the natural self-engrossment of childhood. Adult children must respect their parents as individuals to be valued in their own right. Nevertheless, they will be especially attentive in responding to the physical and mental frailties that old age can bring in its wake as parents become less capable of taking care of themselves. This is all deliberately vague. Only at a vague level of description can we say that these things

---

10. My claims run into some philosophical controversy because they presuppose that we are morally accountable for our attitudes, even though we do not choose them. In defense of that view, see Robert Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 3–31.

command widespread assent. More precision would inevitably expose reasonable disagreement about the content and stringency of adult filial duty.

The fact that the duty is constituted by a "debt" of gratitude does not mean it can be understood as if relationships between children and parents were something close to a fair economic transaction, with creditors and debtors anxious to give nothing more than fairness demands. The necessity of a generous spirit here is a general point about gratitude and not something peculiar to filial virtue. For although most debts can be paid grudgingly or exacted against the debtor's will, debts of gratitude cannot. The demands of filial gratitude on us are unusual, however, in that they can only be discharged through love. Thus even if the reasons we acknowledge to be grateful to our parents are enough to make us grateful, they may not be enough to make us love them as we should. This means that adult children will sometimes be unable to do what filial duty requires of them, even if they are duly grateful for the gift of parental love. We might find our aged parents too uninteresting or annoying to love. But this is morally much the same as the father who finds that his young child is too untalented or otherwise disagreeable to love. If the duty to love still holds in the latter case, as I think many of us would agree, it is hard to see why it should not in the former as well. Maybe the best we can do in either case is to pretend to be the kind of person who can fulfill the duty in the hope that acting as if we love will help us in due course really to love as we should. Sometimes by wearing a mask we grow to become the mask, and that can be a good thing.

The claims I have made about filial duty have important corollaries. First, the responsibilities that belong to the adult child of good parents hold simply in virtue of being the child of such parents. It is beside the point to say that one never agreed to be their child or that one never agreed to receive their love on the understanding that one would reciprocate that love after childhood was over. They are ascribed rather than elective responsibilities. I can choose to "disown" my parents, just as they could "disown" me. But unless there are circumstances that annul the special responsibilities of the adult child, to "disown" one's parents is merely to refuse to acknowledge responsibilities that one has irrespective of that choice.[11] Second, because the responsibilities of the adult child involve the demonstration of love and care to particular human

11. By focusing on a case in which the parents of an adult child behave so badly that the child's duties to the parents are annulled, Jane English is led to the mistaken conclusion that adult children have no filial duties in the first place. See "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" in *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood*, ed. Onora O'Neill and William Ruddick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 351–56.

beings—and not merely, say, the emotionally neutral provision of ben-
efits or services sundered from any such attitudes—these are respon-
sibilities whose discharge requires relational ties intrinsic to the moral
agent's very sense of self. To fail morally here is to betray relationships
(or perhaps to fail to cultivate relationships) that are properly central
to identity. That is what I mean by an "identity-conferring" commitment.
If I am a good son to my father, my relationship to him is identity
conferring; it is not something I can properly regard as extrinsic to who
I am, as I might regard my ties to a friendly acquaintance or a business
associate with whom I share no deep and abiding affective bond.

   These two claims about adult filial morality provide some necessary
background to what I want to say about one kind of situation in which
individuals who assimilate are subject to the charge of betrayal. The
necessary background is this. I can find myself with onerous moral
responsibilities simply because of an ascribed social role—son of Michael
Callan, say—and the responsibilities might be such that they could only
be fulfilled by cultivating certain identity-conferring relational ties to
those with whom I am closely connected because of that role. Perhaps
membership in the cultural community in which one grew up can be
construed as an ascribed social role of sorts or, maybe better, an ascribed
ensemble of roles. Assimilation is an abandonment of that social role
or roles and whatever special moral responsibilities might go with them.
Those who remain within the culture will sometimes view assimilation
as a kind of personal betrayal, an abandonment of relational ties to the
community that are properly central to the ethical identity of the one
who assimilates. Only someone without gratitude would do that, or so
they might think.

   If assimilation is to count as a kind of betrayal, akin to filial in-
gratitude, it is presumably to be contrasted with an ideal of cultural
fidelity. I take it that this is analogous to filial love in the sense that the
role responsibilities it entails encompass exigent attitudinal demands
and not merely behavioral requirements. To maintain cultural fidelity
is not merely to behave outwardly but to think and feel as those who
properly belong to that culture. The attitudinal demands at issue here
are not the same as love, though I take it that they are like love in that
they link our lives to the fate of particular others in a robust sense of
common fate. Without that stipulation, cultural fidelity could not be a
value that implicates our identity.

   The same point can be made from a different angle by exploiting
the idea of "role distance." That idea "is part of a dramaturgical imagery
of the self, according to which the self consists, at least in part, of the
social roles that it enacts. The special idea that the idea of role distance
introduces into this picture relates to the self's capacity to locate itself,
metaphorically speaking, at variable distances from the roles it occupies.

. . . When I fully identify with a role, when the role distance, to further exploit the spatial metaphor, is down to zero, I enact the role transparently."[12] People who unambiguously love their parents are thus analogous to those whose sense of belonging to their formative culture is wholehearted and free of alienating doubts or hesitations. Conversely, those who struggle to cultivate filial love parallel those who struggle with the temptation to assimilate.

Presumably, a distinction has to be made here between cultures that support the formation of identity in ways that create a debt of gratitude and cultures that do not. However that distinction is made, it seems sure to have at least one unwelcome consequence. The cultures that are the most badly equipped to provide an auspicious venue for the formation of identity, either because of oppression or natural misfortune, must in general be the least apt to create debts of gratitude among those who grow up within them. The mere fact that a culture might confer only sparse material benefits on the young is not in itself the problem because our gratitude properly responds not to the size of the benefit we receive but rather to the scale of the sacrifice the beneficiary makes in our behalf. But the travails of parents and adult kin in the midst of oppression or extreme misfortune will tend to impose immense strains on their relations with children. Sacrifice is possible but does not come easily in the midst of great suffering. Yet cultures under such severe stress are the ones about which ethical qualms regarding the assimilation of insiders are most likely to arise. If a pampered young surfer from California goes native on Bali, it seems odd to me at least to accuse him of ingratitude to his culture. It is when destitute Balinese peasants are seduced to give up their traditional ways out of sheer economic desperation that we fret about assimilation. Now this is precisely where concerns about assimilationism might also apply, and so we might begin to suspect that the gratitude-based argument for cultural fidelity merely steals a semblance of plausibility from our revulsion to assimilationism. But there are more decisive objections to that argument than the intuitions we may (or may not) have about its force in different cultural circumstances.

One conspicuous difference between filial relations and formative cultural ties is this. The debt of gratitude I owe my parents is to individual human beings; whatever I might owe to my culture is due to a collective entity, even if it is an entity that encompasses the lives of many individuals in some sense. Gratitude is also a response to the goodwill of others, not merely to the receipt of benefits, or at least that is true when gratitude is owed and not merely laudable. Of course, an institution or

12. Meir Dan-Cohen, "Law, Community, and Communication," in his *Harmful Thoughts: Essays on Law, Self, and Morality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 13–14.

social practice may have a benevolent purpose, and to that extent, those who benefit from its activities may incur debts of gratitude. But the assumption that a culture might have some overarching benevolent purpose that makes it a fit object of gratitude is, at best, a mysterious idea. A culture is simply the way a given people live together over time, and its content will attest to the operation of innumerable different purposes, as well as the abundant influence of sheer chance. The purposes intrinsic to this or that institution within the culture will certainly work to the benefit of many people. But this cannot mean that the culture itself is benevolently purposeful toward anyone in particular. Maybe gratitude to one's formative culture is just a shorthand way of talking about the disparate debts of gratitude we incur to individuals and institutions when we grow up in any secure cultural setting and things go well for us. Yet if that is so, it remains unexplained why the relevant debt compels us to live out our lives within the culture. I can be a loving son, a loyal friend to the friends of my childhood, and a generous patron to institutions that helped me to prosper in my youth and still assimilate to another culture than the one in which I grew up.

Even if gratitude to a formative culture is an intelligible sentiment, it is wildly implausible to suppose that the debt it implies could foreclose assimilation. On no reasonable interpretation of filial duty is the adult child subservient to the will of parents. My duty is to love and care for my parents; it is not to comply with my parents' or anyone else's demands as to how I should fulfill that duty. To suppose otherwise would be to reintroduce just those patriarchal assumptions that undermine the ancient argument about gratitude and political obligation. Adult filial duty and adult filial obedience are *not* the same thing. But there is no conceptual gap between the supposed duty to avoid assimilation and a duty to avoid what cultural insiders take to be assimilation. Forgoing assimilation and compliance with authoritative insiders' dictates on what counts as assimilation *are* the same thing. Thus a duty of cultural fidelity that foreclosed assimilation would be degrading: it would make all one's choices subject to current norms about what comports with membership in a particular culture. Although the norms might be lax, that possibility can be no more comforting to the sensibility of those of us who disdain servility than the prospect of patriarchal authority being mild. Duties of cultural fidelity are as repugnant to that sensibility as duties of filial obedience.

The argument cannot stop there. When charges of cultural betrayal and ingratitude are made in the context of assimilation, it is sometimes unclear whether cultural identity rather than some importantly different kind of ascribed social membership is really the central consideration. The relevant collectivity may not be a culture but something else. I want now to consider in some detail a case that illustrates the kind of am-

biguity I have in mind. The case itself is not particularly important; in fact, it borders on the trivial. But it provides a window on a range of interesting moral phenomena that are not well understood.

III

In an interview on the Oprah Winfrey show in 1997, the golfer Tiger Woods denied that he was African American. He said that as a child he had invented a word to name his multiracial identity—he was "Cablinasian." The word was meant to stand for his mixture of Caucasian, black, (American) Indian, and Asian ancestry. With some prompting from Winfrey, Woods agreed that calling himself African American might appear to slight his Thai mother.[13] He also said on several other occasions that he has no special duty to be a role model for African American children, as opposed to children in general.[14] Persistent questions by the media about his racial identity following the interview with Winfrey eventually led him to issue a media statement that would be his "final comment" on the issue. Although equally proud of his ethnic heritage on his mother's and father's sides, Woods insisted that all this was ultimately irrelevant to who he is: "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."[15]

What did it mean for Woods to say that he was not African American? The claim is ambiguous. The labels "black" and "African American" are assigned on what might be called "merely" racial grounds: if your bodily appearance fits the racial standard (or if any of your traceable ancestors did so), then you fill the bill, like it or not. Woods did not stupidly suppose that he did not fill the bill.[16] The American convention for racial classification that made anyone with black ances-

13. "Transcript of the Oprah Winfrey Show, August 24, 1997" (Burrell's Information Services, Livingston, NJ), 15–16.

14. Gary Katimaya, "Cablinasian Like Me," http://www.salon.com/april97/tiger970430.html.

15. Jay Nordlinger, "Hunting Tiger: Everyone Wants a Piece of Him," *National Review,* September 16, 2002, http://www.nationalreview.com/nordlinger/nordlinger090602.asp. Note that his media statement did not quite square with what he said on the Winfrey show. If calling himself African American would be an affront to his mother, it must remain baffling why calling himself American while declaring his ethnic heritage irrelevant to that identity would be less insulting to her.

16. Woods admits that other people see him as African American/black. Contrary to what some of what his more obtuse critics have supposed, he is not "in denial" about how he is perceived. His point is that he does not want their perceptions to define his identity. See "Transcript of the Oprah Winfrey Show," 9. Compare Gregory Clay, "Woods Can't Hide from the Perception He Is Black, Like It or Not," http://www.tigertales.com/tiger/clay050897.html.

tors black—the so-called one-drop rule—was peculiarly well designed to serve the proprietary interests of slaveholders. Yet this merely racial condition of identity can be combined with at least a couple of others to constitute alternative conceptions of what it means to be black, African American, or the like. These compound conceptions combine the criterion of race with other possible objects of identification that overlap but are ultimately distinct.

One alternative revolves around the idea that solidarity among the victims of antiblack racism in the United States is a strategic necessity. To affirm one's racial identity is to endorse the necessity of mutual support and common resistance to antiblack racism among all whom it afflicts; to refuse to accept the identity is to deny the necessity, or at least to say that despite one's race one has no special obligation to participate in the collective struggle that the necessity is thought to warrant. Because black solidarity matters here for purely strategic reasons, no intrinsic value is assigned to the creation or perpetuation of a distinctive cultural community among people of African ancestry in North America. (That is why the term "black" rather than "African American" may be more apt here.) The ideal of the color-blind society captures just that prospect.[17] That society is one in which no one cares about race any longer, their own or anyone else's. For blacks who regard racial solidarity as no more than a current strategic necessity, the opposition to racism may yet engage their energies and emotions at the most profound level, and, to that extent, it seems right to regard the embrace of the necessity as an identity-conferring commitment. Still, their racial identity is entirely a consequence of circumstances they deplore. They regard race as something that properly recedes in our lives so far as racism is defeated. In a better world, race would no more define who they are than eye color would. Notice that this means Woods's "I am not African American" is open to one interpretation that is particularly controversial. If the strategic conception of identity becomes redundant once racism is overcome, declaring that race no longer matters and that all Americans are, simply, Americans can be taken to mean that racism has already been defeated. That is evidently not what Woods meant to suggest, though the enthusiasm with which so many on the political right greeted his words might be explained by the suggestion.

Writing in 1947, W. E. B. Du Bois pointed to yet another way of

17. "Race-blindness" as the ideal terminus of the struggle against racism and as a route to that end are not the same thing, though they are commonly confused. As Glenn Loury has nicely observed, "race-sighted" means may be necessary to achieve race-blind ends. See *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 135–36.

thinking about what it means to be whatever it is that Woods said he is not: "The so-called Negro group . . . while it is in no sense absolutely cut off physically from its fellow Americans, has nevertheless a strong, hereditary cultural unity born of slavery, common suffering, prolonged proscription, and curtailment of political and civil rights. . . . Prolonged policies of segregation and discrimination have involuntarily welded the mass almost into a nation within a nation."[18] The relevant conception here, whose antecedents are to be found far back in the nineteenth century, is cultural rather than merely racial or racial and strategic: Du Bois's "so-called Negro group" is a quasi-nation, fused together by a searing history of enslavement and injustice. Whereas racial solidarity is only a means to an end, and the means is to be abandoned once the end is achieved, Du Bois contends that common oppression has brought into being an imagined community, to borrow Benedict Anderson's resonant phrase, whose flourishing across time becomes an end in itself. (Here "African American" rather than "black" would seem to be the apt label because, like other such communities, its ancestral origins are invoked as the lodestar for an inspiring future.[19] However, the interchangeable use of the labels is now so pervasive that it would be merely pedantic of me to swim against the linguistic tide.)

The idea of a *quasi*-nation needs some explanation. The aims of nationhood, as traditionally understood, can be achieved only through the nation state or substantial political autonomy within a multination state. Under no other conditions can a people be reasonably assured that its culture will endure into an indefinite future.[20] But success in the perpetuation of African American cultural identity can be interpreted in ways that do not fit that pattern. The collective goals of liberation and self-determination could mean full and equal citizenship in an American polity on terms that do not erase the sense of being a distinct people, rather than the more radical ideals of separate nationhood associated with Black Power, for example, during the 1960s. As the tide of Black Power receded, the ideal of a culturally distinctive and indefinitely enduring African American community did not dissolve with it, and the idea continues to resonate strongly in that community.[21]

18. Du Bois, quoted in George M. Frederickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 287.

19. The idea of a mythic "Golden Age" as a critical ingredient in national identity is a prominent theme in Anthony Smith's influential work on nationalism. See, e.g., *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 62–70.

20. Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 176–79.

21. Frederickson, *Black Liberation*, 297; Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 85–134.

As Du Bois noted, African American culture comprises more than a history of oppression and resistance to that oppression. Among other things, it includes some separate institutions, such as black colleges, which were developed during Jim Crow and have survived its demise, unique mutations of Christian and Islamic worship, a family of remarkably vibrant and influential musical traditions, a distinctive vernacular, and more controversially, behavioral norms that are in some measure the legacy of slavery and its oppressive aftermath. This by no means entails that black culture involves the construction of some "prototype of blackness" out of these disparate materials, a prototype against which individuals could then be measured as more or less faithful or faithless.[22] Unfortunately, in some circumstances almost anything can be turned into a boundary of racial membership that insiders cross at their peril. African American youth can sometimes treat their peers as racial pariahs simply for daring to take their schooling seriously.[23] But outside these relatively marginal cases, I assume that the fulcrum of African American culture is identification with the historic struggle against antiblack racism. The relevant identification can be as wholehearted for those whose way of life is in other ways indistinguishable from that of white Americans as it is for those who engage in a fuller range of African American cultural practices. Where the identification differs from a merely strategic sense of racial solidarity is that 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. So long as antiblack racism exists on a substantial scale, the distinction between those whose conception of membership is merely strategic and those who think of African American identity in quasi-national terms will inevitably be blurred, though we might expect the distinction to become more salient in American life as racism recedes.

Woods's repudiation of African American identity only makes sense in light of the distinctions between a merely racial category, a strategy of moral struggle, and a conception of cultural membership. First of all, he could not mean that he did not meet the conventional racial

22. Tommie Shelby claims that a common national identity for African Americans would require conformity to a substantive prototype specified by distinctive values, etc. See "Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression?" *Ethics* 112 (2002): 231–66. But recent work on national identity shows that a common identity is consistent with abundant value pluralism: see, e.g., Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). That said, Shelby's excellent article was an enormously helpful stimulus in writing this article.

23. Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu, "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the Burden of 'Acting White,'" *Urban Review* 18 (1986): 176–206; Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capitol High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

criteria for being black or African American. He could well regard those criteria as a noxious legacy of slavery, and those who applauded Woods's decision predictably focused on that issue. But he could not *simply* reject them as such, regardless of his reasons for doing so. That is because the same criteria are necessary (but not sufficient) to both black strategic solidarity and African American cultural membership. That being so, his words could not but be understood as both a rejection of cultural membership and of the instrumental solidarity that black opposition to racism might require.

Two caveats are necessary here. First, to refuse to identify oneself as African American or black is not the same as regarding the struggle against racism as unimportant. Nor does it mean one sees oneself as having no duty to contribute to its success. It is simply to say that no special identity-conferring commitment links one to *that* community and its particular fate. Similarly, I might see care for the aged as an important moral issue and regard myself as having some general obligation to contribute to that task. But even if that prompts me to behave with noble concern toward the elderly couple who live next door, that is not the same as believing that I am morally bound to them by any identity-conferring commitment of the kind that filial duty entails. Identity-conferring ties to particular individuals or communities may be one source of ethical reasons, but they are certainly not the only ones. Thus we cannot infer any culpable indifference to the oppression of African Americans from Woods's refusal to count himself among them.

Second, this is not a case of assimilation. It is merely a case of racial disidentification: a refusal to align one's identify with an ascribed racial category. For in no sense does it seem right to say that at some point during adulthood Woods "left" the culture of his childhood and "joined" another. So far as we know, Woods's refusal to identify himself as African American was constant and unambiguous throughout his life. We could easily imagine a slightly different case in which the rejection of African American identity expressed a decision to assimilate. (Imagine a Tiger Farrakhan, son of Louis.) But that does not seem to warrant any different ethical response than the case at hand. The ethically crucial issue, as I understand it, is this. By virtue of ascribed racial identity, Woods would be taken by many people to owe identity-conferring commitment to African Americans as a cultural community or a morally strategic association. His refusal to make that commitment is a matter of disowning "his" people in a sense whose moral force parallels the conduct of adult children who "disown" their parents, or so a gratitude-based argument for role fidelity would suggest.

This is how the argument might be made. Tiger Woods is the beneficiary of the extraordinary efforts that generations of blacks endured in their struggle against oppression. Opposition to racism typically pro-

voked ferocious retribution throughout American history. Yet little progress in their plight might have occurred were it not for the persistent willingness of so many to invite that retribution for the sake of coming generations. Further, the sheer determination of countless ordinary African Americans to live decent and productive lives, despite the great weight of their oppression, enabled many of their children to do so as well and sustained across generations the self-respect and social competence to make use of opportunities that a more just world might one day extend to them. James Baldwin said it well: "We emptied oceans with a home-made spoon and moved mountains with our hands."[24] The remarkable professional success of Woods is in part due to the sacrifices that blacks in America have over generations made to achieve freedom and equality for their descendants. Their beneficence to him creates a debt of gratitude to them that he can elect to deny. But the debt still holds, regardless of his denial. Moreover, the debt is such that it requires identity-conferring commitment. Just as the debt to a parent cannot be discharged by disowning them, however well in other respects an adult child might treat them after doing so, Woods's debt cannot be repaid by denying his African American or black identity, however impressive his conduct might otherwise be in helping them to overcome their oppression.

The argument seems more promising if the imputed moral failing is the renunciation of racial solidarity rather than cultural membership. For one thing, the generations of blacks to whom Woods is allegedly ungrateful were not united in the aspiration to sustain a distinct culture. Their common ground was the hope for a future in which antiblack racism would be overcome. If Woods had proudly identified himself as African American and declared a heartfelt attachment to all things culturally associated with that identity *except* the struggle against antiblack racism, that would surely not be any more appealing to those who were troubled by the words he did in fact use. And although gratitude of some sort is no doubt the fitting human response to the cultural achievements of African Americans, the good done by their achievements would seem to be rather widely dispersed these days, far beyond as well as within the African American community. That is very obviously true in the arts, but much the same can be said of the African American contribution in politics, say, or scholarship. So whatever gratitude is appropriate should be widely dispersed as well. If that is so, the relevant debt of gratitude cannot function as a boundary marker of identity within the black community.

Maybe we could make a parallel point about the historic moral debt

24. James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," in his *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America), 705.

of all living Americans to those blacks who united strategically against racism in the past. On any morally persuasive conception of a good life, it is not altogether independent of the justice or injustice of the social conditions in which it is lived; and that being so, a less racist America makes better lives possible for everyone, not just the primary victims of racism. Nevertheless, antiblack racism has conferred some very real advantages on many whites, and so far as antiblack racism is defeated, the foremost beneficiaries of its defeat are surely blacks themselves. Any debt of gratitude that holds will be especially great there, even if others have some reason to be grateful too.

The cardinal point now is whether there is a morally apt analogy between Woods's refusal to identify with strategic black solidarity and failure to accept adult filial duty. The analogy breaks down at two separate points. The first has to do with the relationship between the actual object of gratitude and the proper object of gratitude. The second is about the relationship between an imputed debt of gratitude and what must be done to discharge it.

IV

When gratitude works as it should, those to whom we should be grateful and the actual recipients of our gratitude are one and the same. So when both parents, for example, have fulfilled their duties as parents, both are properly the recipients of their adult child's love and care. A child who is loving to one parent but contemptuous and indifferent to the other in these circumstances thereby fails to fulfill the relevant duty because the actual object of gratitude and its proper object are misaligned, so to speak.

That Woods should be very grateful to African Americans who fought together against racism is obvious. Equally obvious is his reason to be grateful to those who fought with Americans of other races, including whites, against the same evil. If racial solidarity is one strategic possibility in the effort to end racism, another has long been interracial solidarity. Woods is the beneficiary of all who took either option. But if African Americans who engaged in interracial cooperation against racism cannot be justly excluded from the scope of his gratitude, neither can the other Americans with whom they cooperated. So, on the one hand, his gratitude would be misaligned with the proper object of gratitude if it were merely directed to those who chose racial solidarity. On the other, if his gratitude is to encompass those who chose interracial solidarity as well, the gratitude cannot be expressed through an affirmation of African American identity because its proper object—all African Americans who worked against racism along with all who worked with them—is not exclusively African American.

Maybe Woods should be more grateful to African Americans who

chose racial rather than interracial solidarity. Any argument for saying that he should would require, at least, good evidence to the effect that those who practiced the former had greater love or goodwill for future potential victims of antiblack racism. Whether such evidence can be found may require a more clairvoyant historical scholarship than we can actually achieve. More important, the *point* of making one's identity hinge on a comparison of debts of gratitude to people whose efforts were so deeply entangled with each other in the course of the long American struggle against racism is at best obscure. In the case of filial duty, we can easily imagine a dilemma in which someone has good moral reason to try to weigh that debt of gratitude against another—to an old and trusted friend, say—in order to decide what is best to do. The circumstances might be such that one debt can be repaid but not the other. No parallel to this arises in Woods's case. Trying to disentangle the consequences of racial and interracial solidarity in diminishing the oppression of African Americans is not trying to elucidate ultimately distinct moral considerations that bear upon some serious personal choice. Those who fought racism through racial solidarity in one context (e.g., through black religious congregations) very commonly took the interracial route in another (e.g., by supporting the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]). The mobilization of different groups in different contexts for a common purpose is to be commended as instrumentally rational; it is not to be condemned as inconsistency on a matter of deep principle. To worry about whether one owes a greater debt to those who took one route rather than the other is to fret about a distinction that makes no morally interesting difference. The big debt of wide scope that Woods owes, if he owes any, is surely to the many people—most of them black, but some of them not—who have fought to end antiblack racism in the United States. Now if that is indeed the proper object of his gratitude, whatever debt he owes surely cannot require that he identify himself as African American. For a debt of gratitude to an interracial coalition pitted against a common social evil cannot plausibly require someone to define who he is in terms of just one group in the coalition, even if that group is the major partner.

Suppose for the moment that the analogy with filial duty did not fail at this first point, and we could in fact claim that a correctly aligned debt of gratitude on Woods's part was owed to African Americans as a strategically defined collectivity opposed to racism. It would still fail for another reason. If that collectivity does serve a purely strategic function, then it must always be an open question whether the strategy is currently effective and whether the interracial alternative might be not be better. The fact that a great debt of gratitude is owed to those who chose racial solidarity in the past is entirely beside the point if the issue is what would

be strategically best now and in the future. Anyone—including Woods perhaps—might reasonably reject racial in favor of interracial solidarity against racism. To refuse to consider that possibility would be to exalt the means over the end—racial solidarity over the defeat of racism— and that would be instrumentally irrational. This is quite different than the case of filial virtue, where the relevant relational ties between adult children and their parents must be valued intrinsically by the children if the debt of gratitude is to be discharged at all. I suspect that the obviousness of this difference is obscured so long as we are unclear about the difference between "I am African American" as an affirmation of strategic racial solidarity and as a declaration of loyalty to a quasi-nation. As I noted earlier, in the latter but not the former case, relational ties within the relevant collectivity are valued intrinsically. But as I also argued, Woods owes no particular debt to that quasi-nation once its contribution to the struggle against racism is set aside.

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. To be sure, that benefit might still create a moral debt for Woods that requires identity-conferring commitment to the struggle against anti-black racism in America, irrespective of the race of those who participate in the struggle. But since that possibility has nothing to do either with assimilation or the related problem of whether there can be an obligation to maintain a racial identity, I shall not pursue it far here.[25]

Interesting questions remain about whether Woods's racial disidentification was a refusal to do something morally admirable or whether he did something morally bad, even though he had no duty

25. No one could sensibly deny that Woods owes a debt of gratitude to those who in the past have fought antiblack racism in the United States. What is less clear is whether this requires identity-conferring commitment to that particular moral struggle. For example, if Woods became devoted to overcoming world hunger, or with securing human rights in fledgling democracies, and more or less ignored the victims of antiblack racism in the United States, would he be guilty of moral betrayal? I am inclined to think not. In at least one obvious respect, his ignoring the victims of antiblack racism would not be analogous to the man who neglects his aged parents in the pursuit of more grandiose moral ends. In the case of adult filial duty, the particularism of the parental interest that is at stake is crucial to its meaning: aged parents crave the love of their *own* adult children. But the interests of blacks in the struggle against racism would not seem to be comparably particularistic. Why should it matter who contributes to the success of the struggle so long as success is the outcome? No obvious good answer is available. Yet here again, confusion between a strategic struggle against a universal evil and a quasi-national project of liberation may cast its spell. The quasi-national project valorizes the self-determination of a particular people, and so liberation is essentially *their* struggle against *their* oppressors. Foreign allies (e.g., white Americans) may help in the struggle, but the oppressed race itself (including Tiger Woods) must take the primary responsibility for their own liberation.

to do otherwise. The questions require that we consider the likely impact of Woods's identifying himself as African American. Once upon a time, a brilliant and famous black athlete proudly affirming his racial identity would have been a great moment in American race relations. But things have changed a lot since Jackie Robinson first played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Whatever other problems now afflict black Americans, a paucity of brilliant and famous athletes who self-identify as black is not one of them. When that self-identification is now proudly made, its sheer conventional propriety may do as much to nourish self-congratulation about how far America has come in its struggle against antiblack racism as it does to remind anyone of how far it has yet to go. To be sure, Woods's extraordinary accomplishment is in a sport that has traditionally been closed to blacks, though his accomplishment hardly means that professional golf is now a broad new avenue of upward social mobility for African American children in bad schools in poor neighborhoods. If Woods had said he was African American, he would have been stating the obvious, and he might have spared himself some public criticism in the bargain. So I find it hard to see anything particularly admirable in the road not taken.

It might still be true that he did something bad in refusing to identify himself as black. Perhaps he thought there was something shameful in being black. But that is uncharitable speculation. When people refuse to define who they are according to the categories that others would ascribe to them, their refusal entails no disparagement of others who embrace the same categories as integral to their own identity. We can also speculate about the moral and political consequences of Woods's racial disidentification. That is a genuinely troubling issue. I noted earlier how easily his decision could be taken to support the view that antiblack racism in America is now largely a thing of the past. However, the blurring of racial boundaries may help to erode and not merely to conceal their importance, and if Woods's refusal to comply with the one-drop rule helps in that regard, then it would surely be a very good thing. But all this is little more than fanciful guesswork. And no one should be expected to construct their identity on the basis of guesswork about the remote social effects of what they choose. Tiger Woods's racial identity is his own business, not ours.

V

The distinction between assimilation and complicity in oppression is liable to become blurred whenever a culture is under direct assault from assimilationist practices. Some stand fast against the pressure to assimilate and thereby resist their oppression. Against that background of steadfast resistance, those who do assimilate will appear to have given at least small victories to their oppressors, and accusations of complicity

may follow quickly behind. The meaning of such accusations is necessarily sensitive to differences in conceptions of complicity, and because that is a peculiarly difficult concept, taking their measure threatens to entangle us in vexed disputes about its interpretation. But we can in fact finesse those disputes pretty easily.

Suppose we imagine a continuum of assimilationist pressures to which a cultural community might be subject. At one end of the continuum, we have assimilationism at its most violent and pervasive: those who resist the pressure to assimilate are exposed to the imminent threat of death or destitution. Toward the other, the pressures are milder, intermittent, widely contested, and without official sanction. The price of adhering to one's culture is the occasional insult or snub, a slightly diminished set of economic opportunities perhaps, or the like. At any point along this continuum, assimilation can in principle occur for reasons that have nothing to do with assimilationism. But at the coercive end of the continuum that seems little more than a bare conceptual possibility. Perhaps some real religious conversions have occurred at the point of a sword, though it must be very hard to think of anything but the sword on such occasions. Any assimilation that occurs in the context of massive and coercive assimilationism virtually rules out its being explained for other reasons. For no humane conception of complicity could entail that those who do assimilate in those dire straits share in responsibility for oppression. Matters are plainly different at the other end of the continuum. Here assimilationist pressures are registered through disincentives to adhere to the culture under threat, but they do not so engulf the field of deliberation that choosing to assimilate for reasons that have nothing to do with those disincentives is precluded. The desire to profit from unjust social advantages can plainly come into play now, and to the extent that it does, concerns about complicity will properly arise. Nevertheless, decisions to assimilate cannot be even presumptive evidence of that desire. People who grow up in a culture subject to these milder assimilationist pressures might often choose to assimilate simply because they think they have found God or true love, and in choosing for such reasons, the occasional social snub they will now escape or the slight boost to their economic opportunities they will now enjoy could well be something they care nothing about.

My question now is this: where is there room along this continuum for the charge of complicity in oppression against the individual who chooses to assimilate? At or near the coercive end, it is plainly grotesque to press the charge, even if some people do bravely choose death or destitution rather than assimilate. That would be an egregious case of blaming the victim. But at or near the other end of the continuum, the charge would be misplaced for other reasons. In that context, oppression still occurs to whatever degree assimilationist influences persist,

and when someone exploits them to gain personal advantage or is culpably indifferent to their persistence, complicity in oppression might be justly imputed. But to assume that anyone who chooses to assimilate in those circumstances is even presumptively guilty of complicity is absurd. Reasons to assimilate are widely available that have nothing to do with seeking to profit from the oppression of others or being complacent about their fate. More important still, the decision to assimilate is in no way at odds with a vigorous opposition to assimilationism. A decision to convert from Islam to Christianity, say, is perfectly compatible with a militant defense of religious freedom for Muslims when that freedom is under some threat and its defense requires some courage. All this poses an insuperable problem for anyone who would attempt directly to infer complicity in oppression from the decision to assimilate under conditions of assimilationist pressure. 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.

VI

If assimilation does not in itself do wrong to others in the context of assimilationism, it may yet cause or constitute a self-inflicted harm or wrong. My example is the story of Earl Mills, chief of the Mashpee Wapanoag tribe on Cape Cod:

> When I was a kid, I and the young kids I ran around with couldn't have cared less about our Indian background. We never participated in any of the tribal ceremonies, we didn't know how to dance, and we wouldn't have been caught dead in tribal regalia. We thought anyone who made a fuss about our heritage was old-fashioned, and we even used to make fun of the people who did. Well, when I came back from the army, in 1948, I had a different view of such matters. You see, there happened to be two other Indians in my basic training camp at Fort Dix. One of them was an Iroquois from Upper New York, and the other a Chippewa from Montana. I was nineteen years old, away from Mashpee for the first time, and, like most soldiers, I was lonely. Then, one night, the Iroquois fellow got up and did an Indian dance in front of everyone in the barracks. The Chippewa got up and joined him, and when I had to admit I didn't know, I felt terribly ashamed. During the next two years, I had the recurring feeling of not really

knowing who or what I was, and I decided that when I got out of the service I would find out and do something about it.[26]

After his return to Mashpee, Mills learned the tribal traditions he had ridiculed as a child and adolescent. He also went to college and became a high school physical education teacher, a role which enabled him to mentor Mashpee youth through a traumatic cultural transition: "Coming from a tiny town where for nearly three hundred years our people had been considered—and had considered themselves—different from the people all around them, and where there was no tradition of getting an education, Mashpee boys had no real confidence in themselves. . . . We felt like strangers in another world, and we were desperately afraid that we wouldn't be able to make a go of it."[27]

What Mills says about the contempt he showed for Mashpee tradition when growing up might reveal nothing more than the rebellious spirit of youth, a phenomenon that is hardly unique to oppressed cultural minorities. Alternatively, what he says about the timidity and fear of Mashpee adolescents as they entered high school points to a different possible source of that contempt. I want to pursue this alternative interpretation not because it necessarily fits the facts of Mills's particular story better but because it helps to illuminate the relationship between assimilationism and self-respect. The fears that Mashpee youth had on entering high school attest to a sense of cultural inferiority, and, given the long history of assimilationism directed toward the native peoples of North America, that is scarcely surprising. In order to overcome the sense of cultural inferiority, a child or adolescent might be tempted to renounce his own culture, to seek an identity free of the stigma that he must bear so long as that culture claims him as its own. And the more desperate his desire to escape the stigma, the more vehement his renunciation of that culture might be. In other words, assimilation presents itself as a route, perhaps the only route, to self-respect. Of course, to think and feel about one's formative culture in this way is not necessarily to do so fully consciously, and both contempt for one's formative culture and attraction to another might remain deeply ambivalent. This takes us to the really critical point: ambivalence would be peculiarly self-destructive in these circumstances because, to whatever extent identification with the formative culture survives alongside the yearning for self-respect, contempt for the culture would entail self-loathing.

Why then was the public exposure of Mills's cultural ignorance at

26. Paul Brodeur, *Restitution: The Land Claims of the Mashpee, Passamquoddy, and Penobscot Indians of New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), 27–28.
27. Ibid.

Fort Dix a moment of both shame and insight?[28] The answer hinges on the edifying contrast between Mills's youthful attitude toward his formative culture and the very different attitude evinced by the Iroquois and Chippewa dancers. Their dance before the assembled soldiers demonstrated a confidence and pride in their cultural identity that he had lost early in his life or perhaps never had. His ignorance of Indian dance revealed his loss for all to see, and the loss itself seemed utterly shameful in Mills's eyes. But if the loss was shameful, so too was the contemptuous pose he had adopted toward his own culture. He had mocked what he should have cherished. Yet the very possibility of his shame and insight suggest that at some level he did in fact continue to identify with his Mashpee heritage, and thus his contempt had been ambivalent (and perhaps even entangled with self-loathing) all along.[29] The Iroquois and Chippewa dancers did not succumb to the poisonous illusion that only through denying who they were could they be the equal of others. Mills's subsequent return to Mashpee and his embrace of his formative cultural heritage was an emulation of their proud dance.

On this reading of the story, we get a happy ending, though it also contains within itself the possibility of an alternative, sad ending. Without his fateful epiphany at Fort Dix, Mills might have remained both a stranger in the world beyond Mashpee and an alien to the Indian traditions he had renounced, caught between self-loathing and the longing for a human dignity that remained out of reach. Mills's story thus becomes a cautionary tale for people who must struggle to live under the shadow of assimilationism, as the Mashpee have done for centuries. It is about how assimilation can be driven by an illusory quest for self-respect that loosens them from their deepest sources of identity and leaves them unmoored in an alien world. What nourishes the illusion is the stigma that assimilationism imposes on the groups it victimizes. The concept of stigma links particular human differences to invidious stereotypes that function both to distance the powerful and worthy "us" from the relatively powerless and worthless "them" and to rationalize the superior status and entitlement of "us" in relation to "them."[30] In assimilationism, the targeted human differences are cultural, and the

28. John Deigh discusses Mills's case in relation to shame in "Shame and Self-Esteem," *Ethics* 93 (1983): 225–45.

29. One might read his epiphany at Fort Dix as a radical re-creation of the self rather than a conscious recognition of values he had in some sense internalized all along and suppressed through self-deception. But it is noteworthy that Mills uses the language of self-discovery rather than radical choice to construe the experience, and that would seem to favor the latter reading. See Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem."

30. My definition of stigma draws on Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, "Conceptualizing Stigma," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 363–85. On the connection between stigma and racism see Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, 57–107.

predicament of the stigmatized is complicated by the prospect that some, at least, might escape their contemptible condition by erasing the cultural differences that degrade their identity in the first place.

Stories like Mills's—including variants with the sad rather than the happy ending—are no doubt widespread wherever assimilationism persists as a potent cultural force. Yet even then, the role we can plausibly assign to a damaged self-respect is that of the motive rather than the effect of assimilation, and it would be rash to infer that we could improve the situation of the oppressed by blocking or discouraging decisions to assimilate. The inference would be rash because it overlooks the ambiguity of the messages that assimilationism conveys to members of dominated groups. On the one hand, they are offered the prospect of ascending from their degraded state if they can cast aside their formative culture and conduct themselves in a manner acceptable to their social superiors; on the other, precisely because an inferior culture *formed* their identity, their ability to succeed must be doubtful so that even when success is apparent, the appearance may be deceptive. If the first half of this message is an incentive to assimilate that appeals to a damaged self-respect, the second half is a disincentive to do so that appeals to the very same attitude. This reveals no fatal incoherence at the core of assimilationist ideology. For the double message is perfectly suited to a "divide-and-rule" policy toward a dominated cultural group from which some members can be co-opted and kept under control by the very insecurity of their privilege, while others continue to bear the stigma that legitimizes their oppression. But if this is true, then the toll that assimilationism takes on the self-respect of its victims may be as likely to manifest itself in decisions not to assimilate as in decisions to do so.

And this suggests a final important point about Mills's story. What makes the story a happy one on the reading I have outlined is the recovery of a self-respect damaged by assimilationism. Yet the return to cultural fidelity after his alienated youth is only fortuitously related to that outcome. After all, an alternative sad ending would be a return to Mashpee prompted by the sense that he was not good enough to make it in that wider world; and another happy one might have found Mills fulfilled and at peace in the American cultural mainstream. That is at least true so long as a secure self-respect is our measure of success and a damaged self-respect our criterion of failure.

VII

Nothing immediately follows from the argument I have traced so far for policy on the integration of American immigrants, say, or the rights of traditionally oppressed racial or cultural groups in the United States. But the argument can still shed some light on the many contexts in

which such policy must be made. One such context is the practice of multicultural education in American schools.

A common claim among exponents of multicultural education is that any remedy to the oppression inflicted on African Americans throughout their history must be found in part through a form of schooling that befits their culture. In one sense this must be true. All children need to be schooled in ways that befit their culture, regardless of histories of oppression. A curriculum that is to be intelligible and motivationally engaging must be broadly congruent, at least initially, with what children have come to understand and value in the world they inhabit outside the school. That may sometimes require bilingual classrooms, culturally sensitive pedagogy, effective collaboration between schools and neighborhoods, and the like. And no one should be surprised if traditionally oppressed or politically weak groups are less likely to get these good things for their children than others.

Yet notice that nothing in the bare idea that any effective education will befit the culture of its recipients requires a multicultural valorization of divergent cultural identities. The principle is both consistent with multiculturalism and with a zealous cultural monism. After all, if cultural congruence is necessary to the intelligibility and motivational appeal of any curriculum in the early stages of schooling, then that will be so even if the ultimate goal of the school is to inculcate Anglo-conformity. The multiculturalist must want to say that congruence between the school and the child's culture is not merely a means to achieve other ends; it is rather an end in itself, which is to say that the school should teach cultural fidelity in some sense that is opposed to assimilation.

The most obvious way to interpret that proposal in the context of schooling for African American children is as an endorsement of quasi-nation building. Some descriptions of the practice certainly fit that pattern. In Richard Merelman's study of schooling in "Regency County," a predominantly black and middle-class school district in Maryland, strong commitment to multicultural education was evident in both official district policy and in the daily work of teachers, especially black teachers. A cornerstone of the district's policy was the requirement that "students 'must see themselves' in their curriculum and instructional materials."[31] Merelman's classroom observations occurred during Black History Month, when classes in all subjects were focused on the black experience in America. Although he does not note this, much of the teaching Merelman describes is reminiscent of traditional nation building in American schools, with its emphasis on rote memorization and hero worship. Even when something pedagogically inventive was tried—

31. Richard Merelman, "Black History and Cultural Empowerment: A Case Study," *American Journal of Education* 101 (1993): 331–58, 340.

for example, students created a skit on an imaginary discussion between Barbara Jordan, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X—the activity quickly descended into the recitation of biographical facts. Merelman says that for the most part the black experience was presented in the classes he observed as "a series of unrelated concrete events, facts, and persons held together by the historical isolation of blacks, by the need of blacks to be unified as a group, and by diffuse resentment against white domination."[32]

No doubt more educationally imaginative and intellectually rigorous forms of African American quasi-nation building are possible than what Merelman saw in Regency County. And even in the uninspiring form he describes, it would be hard to find much greater fault with efforts to create an imagined community that places Malcolm X in its pantheon of heroes than with one that assigns that role to a handful of white slaveholders. If black teachers and parents seek to use the school as a vehicle of African American quasi-nation building, there is nothing inherently dishonorable in that. My argument on the ethics of assimilation does not say otherwise. What it does suggest, however, is that conscripting children and adolescents to cooperate in that endeavor creates no obligation on their part to continue the endeavor into an indefinite future. The adolescents who choose to assimilate from the quasi-nation—assuming that they ever come to identify with it in the first place—are no more ethically remiss in what they do than those who say that they have had enough of the piano lessons, the family rosary, or the hockey practices dear to the hearts of their parents. No good arguments are available here for charges of betrayal, disloyalty, or ingratitude, even if adult disappointment is typically tricked out in such language.

An alternative and perhaps a more interesting reading of the aims that befit multicultural education for African Americans is possible, a reading that connects with the basic interests of children rather than the merely permissible hopes of adults. For most of their history in the United States, the oppression of blacks had nothing to do with assimilationism. On the contrary, theirs was a condition of subordination so radical that no avenue of assimilation was available. Proving to incredulous whites that blacks *could* assimilate to mainstream America was no trivial achievement in the middle decades of the twentieth century. When William Hastie, one of the heroes of the NAACP's struggle against segregation, was described by a white admirer as "a polished, assimilated gentleman—a black WASP, in fact" no irony or insult was intended.[33]

32. Ibid., 353.
33. Richard Kruger, *Simple Justice: The History of* Brown v. Board of Education *and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Random House, 1975), 156.

Yet a subtler and more recently evolved racism can readily offer assimilation, or at least partial assimilation, on assimilationist terms: the culture of African Americans is more or less comprehensively stigmatized but some can rise above their fallen state, or so the story goes, to find a place within the dominant culture of the nation.[34] The connection between assimilationism and the stigma of cultural inferiority was a point of emphasis earlier in my argument, and the connection may help to clarify a distinctive purpose for multicultural education in the context of that new racism and its assimilationist rationale.

To the extent that any group of children belongs to a culturally stigmatized group, an education that helps them realize the capacity for self-respect and self-determination will likely have to involve more than a little counterstigmatization, so to speak. That is to say, it will have to countervail the image of cultural inferiority that their stigmatization imposes. The purpose here would not be to valorize their culture and preempt assimilation; it would rather be to inoculate the child against demeaning images of the self that society perpetuates, often through processes that escape conscious scrutiny. If counterstigmatization were successful, a child might yet decide to assimilate in the fullness of time. But whether wise or not, the choice would not be driven by a damaged self-respect.

The practice of counterstigmatization closely resembles quasi-nation building in many of its particulars. On the one hand, it entails helping children to appreciate the distinctive contributions of blacks to American history, especially where these have tended to be overlooked or slighted, showing the value of traditions that link the lives of many black children to the experience of their ancestors, and so on. On the other hand, because racial stigmatization is a civic pathology that implicates both perpetrators and victims, the educational goals I just specified would be equally compelling for any American child, not just the racially ascribed members of an African American quasi-nation. These goals would figure at the core of the civic education appropriate for all future citizens. Furthermore, counterstigmatization could not rationally present a curriculum infused with the black experience on the grounds that only there could African American children "see themselves," as

34. For an influential argument about the decline of biological racism in America and the corresponding rise of "racial resentment" toward blacks for their alleged cultural failings, see Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Saunders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). How this racial resentment is related to distinctively American values, such as individualism, and how politically tractable it might be, are matters of ongoing controversy. See Paul Sniderman, Gretchen C. Crosby, and William G. Howell, "The Politics of Race," in *Racialized Politics: The Debate about Racism in America*, ed. David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence Bobo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 236–79.

the educational policy of Regency County prescribed. That would tell them that their identity is determined by their race. To the extent that children came to believe this, the message of the school would converge in an unfortunate way with the message of assimilationism, which promises ascent to elite cultural status to only a privileged few, while others remain irrevocably below.

To reject that message is not to reject the traditions of black America. For if Du Bois could see himself in the company of Shakespeare, arm in arm with Dumas and Balzac, then perhaps an education that encourages a comparable imaginative reach in the formation of identity can invoke at least one venerable precedent in the African American experience.[35]

35. "I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas . . . Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classics, 1982), 138.