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wealth of selves: multiple identities, mestiza consciousness and the subject of politics

Edwina Barvosa, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 2008, 290pp.,
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In a context where social fragmentation continues to be an issue at the forefront of contemporary politics, Edwina Barvosa's book *Wealth of Selves: Multiple Identities, Mestiza Consciousness, and the Subject of Politics* offers important resources for challenging any easy understanding of the benefits the goal of unity may offer the political subject. Beginning with a critical analysis of the way Hispanic immigrants, in particular, continue to be perceived as a threat to the United States due to their multiple ethnic identifications, Barvosa contends that there has not, as yet, been any sufficiently detailed and rigorous account of multiple identities available. As a result, debate over the benefits or problems of multiple identities can not begin in earnest until such an account becomes available. In the following chapters, Barvosa thus seeks to provide a theoretical framework that describes what multiple identities *are*, before moving to discuss what their political effects might be.

At the centre of Barvosa's framework is the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, whose analyses of her own contradictory identities provide a key reference point in discussions of multiple identities. Chapters two and three first analyse Anzaldúa's key notion of *mestiza consciousness*, in particular, the role identity contradictions play in political critique and social transformation. However, as Barvosa notes, Anzaldúa's work is more a provocation to think identity differently, rather than a fully elaborated framework. As a result, Barvosa draws on an impressive variety of interdisciplinary accounts of identity in order to develop a convincing ontology of multiple identities.

In the second half of the book, Barvosa moves on to a discussion of the political effects of multiple identities, arguing that their key political implications reside in the way individuals manage internal contradictions. Chapters four and five examine how multiple identities may be understood as cohesive and open to self-integration without negating or attempting to do away with their contradictions, whereas Chapter six discusses the role of self-craft in managing one's own identities. Throughout, Barvosa seeks to acknowledge the way identities are constructed within contexts of social conflict, while also explaining how

identities may be consciously reworked in ways that can potentially work back on these contexts themselves.

One of the greatest strengths of Barvosa's framework is the introduction of the idea of identity salience to the debate surrounding multiple identities. By exploring the way identity schemes provide shifting frames of reference for one's thoughts and actions, her framework enables a greater understanding of how and when options for acting differently may or may not become available. Significantly, in arguing that contradictory identity schemes can become salient *at the same time*, Barvosa extends accounts of intersectionality to include the way different identities can intersect through associations that are deliberately crafted by the subject themselves. Further, in opposition to philosophers, such as Alisdair MacIntyre, who argue that fragmented identities are devoid of critical agency, Barvosa successfully outlines how identity contradiction is productive of critical and creative thought, making the case that failures to critically engage with the morality of one's actions can actually arise from a lack of internal contradiction.

However, in moving on to address the question of how the subject may be understood as de-centred, but also cohesive over time, Barvosa's account was not as convincing. In particular, her utilisation of William James' notion of 'thought-in-the-moment' and his metaphor of the herdsman to explain this cohesiveness did not seem to adequately capture the complex framework that she had previously developed. What I particularly liked about her framework was the way it explicitly situated the de-centred self within complex interweaving histories, and multiple possible futures. As such, it was not clear how James' 'thought-in-the-moment' could adequately explain the cohesiveness of a subject that exists within an extended temporal framework. Even so, when shifting her focus on cohesiveness towards an analysis of modes of optional self-integration, her development of the notion of 'integrative life projects', in opposition to the notion of integration through unified self-narratives, was insightful and well argued. Her analysis of the political consequences of different modes of self-integration was intriguing and capable of inspiring further analyses.

As a whole, Barvosa's *Wealth of Selves* is well written, elegantly argued and deft in its criticisms. It provides a framework that could extend to many areas that were not made explicit in her work. Her emphasis on the importance of recognition for the expression of one's identity connects her work to the issues addressed by Axel Honneth's work on recognition, and alternative accounts such as Kelly Oliver's work on witnessing. Further, it would be interesting to explore her framework in contexts where splits and divisions in one's sense of identity arise due to disruptions in one's habitual sense of one's lived body, such as those discussed in Havi Carel's *Illness*. Indeed, as a result of its interdisciplinary nature, Barvosa's work will help to spark new conversations in a variety of areas,

while also providing those working in political theory with a well-developed framework for continuing the debate.

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reference

Carel, H. (2008) *Illness*, Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing.

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