*Jesus once said, “The truth will set you free.”*

**Assimilation: A Paradox of Trauma**

As a child, I grew up learning about America being “a melting pot,” thinking how wonderful it was that all cultures were mixed together into one glorious pot that created a stew of different ideas, beliefs and customs.

I should note I am white.

But through the years, that knowledge has become muddied as I learned more and allowed myself to be taught more by those who lived assimilation firsthand, not relying on a tangential depiction from a history book that masked the full truth and excluded others.

I now know that within that melting pot there is also a big ladleful of assimilation, a lot of which is forced, not blended. The result is a melting pot that welcomes some ingredients but rejects others. The reality is that only some social groups assimilate. Others, often, are subject to racialization.

Cultural assimilation is defined as the process in which a minority group or culture comes to resemble a society's majority group or assimilate the values, behaviors and beliefs of another group whether fully or partially.

Assimilate is separately defined as to take in and make a part of your basic knowledge something learned from others, so that you can use it as your own. Sounds benign, right?

Assimilation is not just a process of absorption and becoming more alike. Rather, assimilation is a process of racialization and subordination and of power and inequality.

When I was asked to share my visceral response in a recent meeting to the word, assimilate, I shut down. How did I have the right to share my non-Native-derived thoughts to an audience of Natives. However, I did immediately put myself in their shoes, thinking that the word was a trigger of historical trauma in a really big way.

Assimilation has since been handed down to generations of immigrants who are considered probationary or unworthy until they demonstrate that they’ve adopted the dominant culture’s mores and customs.

Taking it one step further, they’re expected to contribute to society, especially to the market. In the United States, jumping through these sorts of hoops or closing other doors that are pathways to embracing cultural traditions that are generations deep have been part of the assimilation process for people of color, natives and newcomers alike for hundreds of years.

For example, if Native Peoples wanted to be U.S. citizens prior to 1924, they had to live “separate and apart from any tribe of Indians,” take up “the habits of civilized life” and show that they were “competent and capable of managing [their] affairs” over a period of 25 years. It’s not well documented how many earned U.S. citizenship after their 25-year trial. However, by the time Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924, 125,000 Native Americans (out of an estimated total population of 300,000) still weren’t U.S. citizens.

This is just one example. In fact, from 1790 to 1920, the U.S. government implemented various policies and programs aimed at assimilating Native People into European-American culture. Several programs were implemented that involved forcibly separating Native children from their families and tribes and placing them in boarding schools. In 1893, Congress allowed the Bureau of Indian Affairs to withhold food rations and supplies from parents or guardians who refused to enroll and keep their children in the boarding schools where abuse and poor medical services were rampant. These children were then taught the English language and European-American customs against their will.

Furthermore, the government passed laws to force Native People to abandon their traditional way of life and adopt European-American agricultural practices and Christian religion. As a result, many Indian peoples lost much of their culture and part or all of their languages. Traditional lands were taken away for European American settlement, including places sacred to Indian peoples. These inequitable policies resulted in severe harm and trauma to Native communities, which has had significant and long-lasting effects on their cultural identity and well-being today.

In 2022, when the bones of hundreds of children were found near boarding schools across North America, those wounds were uncovered to reveal that horror all over again.

The historical trauma is real. Hear from what some Natives explain what the word, “assimilate” means to them:

*“Be white… give up culture and traditions...give up pagan ways.”*

*“Becoming someone other than myself to fit into another cultural norm.”*

*“If I say the first thing that comes to mind, it has to be lost, lose, losing, etc. But when I decide to look at it from an opposite perspective, it can be taking the best things from individualities and allowing them to assimilate. What occurs is putting the best things from each identity together to produce a super outcome.”*

*“Assimilation is a complicated process that involves the absorption of individual people or social groups into mainstream culture. (I don’t want to use the word Native American because we are older than America).”*

Today, this plight in part (and I always caution against making one plight directly synonymous to another…because they are never that way) can be likened to that of participants in Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a program established by executive order in 2012 that grants certain undocumented immigrants a temporary stay of deportation and temporary permission to work. Even though they were born here, they are made to feel like “others” or transients. DACA doesn’t lead to citizenship or legal permanent residence. In addition to meeting “several guidelines,” DACA participants must renew their status every year for a fee of $495. DACA, which is at best temporary, formalizes its participants’ marginalization and crystallizes the paradox of assimilation.

But as we continue to explore the word assimilate, it’s also important to talk about acculturation. Both assimilation and acculturation involve changing cultural identity, beliefs, values and behaviors to fit into a new culture, but the latter allows individuals to keep their cultural identity.

As we delve even deeper into this subject, it becomes clearer that this is not something that can be tidied up into a neat little box with straight lines and no gaps and one that placates the naysayers who insist on erasing Native history and that of other marginalized peoples.

Bring in the concept of intersectionality-- the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people like gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability--and the whole picture gets even cloudier.

Yes, I am white, but I am also a woman. Imagine from the point of view of a Native woman. Taking that one step further, imagine from the point of view as an aging Native woman or a Native woman who identifies as LGBTQ. The layers of trauma that assimilation can bring are varied yet thick and the transfer of that trauma to the next generation is hard to stop without the exchange of the truth, an authentic history.

You can see that just looking at America as being a melting pot just doesn’t work. Each individual ingredient needs to be recognized, celebrated and allowed to be mixed in or have its own spot in the pot too.

So rather than seen as blending in or becoming more alike, wouldn’t assimilation be better if it was more a process of blurring the boundaries, coexisting and learning from each other? What if rather than a pot, it was like a mosaic where there was space for different cultures to fit together?