Reconstructing Hybridity

Post-Colonial Studies in Transition

Edited by Joel Kuortti and Joppi Nyman
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Introduction: Hybridity Today

Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman

Abstract

This introductory chapter consists of two parts. In the first section we seek to present a critical discussion of the term hybridity and its use in contemporary post-colonial discourse. In so doing, we will address several viewpoints onto the idea of hybridity presented by theorists from Homi K. Bhabha to Néstor Garcia Canclini. We will argue that the critical power of hybridity is in its ability to question what appears natural and complete, to problematize naturalized boundaries. The second part of this chapter presents briefly the theoretical and empirical studies collected in this volume. What unites the articles is that they seek to show the relevance of the notion of hybridity in approaching a variety of phenomena ranging from ethnic writing and theatre to contemporary cinema in a world characterized by transnational migration and the globalization of culture.

Setting the Scene

In her poem ‘So Mush of Me,’ the Ceylonese Malaysian poet Charlene Rajendran discusses the double heritage of a post-colonial subject with roots in two or more cultures:

So mush of me is English.
My dreaded colonial heritage.
From Enid Blyton to Beatrix Potter
my idylls lie distant in Yorkshire.

So mush of me lives Anglo.
My dreaded white inheritance.
From Laura Ashley to Marks & Spencer
my istanas all built in Windsor.

So, mush of me
misplaced.
Really I am Malaysian,
Ceylonese, Tamil,
Anglophone, All.
Mingled by history
not choice.¹

While Rajendran’s multicultural subject recognizes its constructed nature, reflecting on its ‘Anglo’ lifestyle and the significance of Englishness for its formation, it also comments on the jumbled state of post-colonial hybridity by describing the speaker’s identity as ‘mush.’ In so doing, the poem uses linguistic play to construct hybrid cultural post-coloniality as a state of in-betweenness constructed in and through historical processes. While the poem mixes languages and cultural traditions to convey a sense of multiculturality, it is by no means a mere celebration of a post-national and hybrid subjectivity. Indeed, Rajendran’s speaker’s positionality is problematized as a result of hybridity and described as ‘misplaced,’ ‘misfit,’ ‘mixed up,’ and ‘muddled.’ Yet this positionality, while ‘dreaded,’ also opens up new dimensions of experience where the global and the local generate something new, as shown in the final lines of the poem:

My anglicised fancies
in tempatan dreams
make mush
in so mush of me.

Here, Rajendran’s poem uses the Bahasa Malaysia word tempatan (Eng. local) to talk about the speaker’s dreams. In connection with the metropolitan, anglicised fancies, these dreams build up the junction of global and local that is located in the speaker as the ‘so mush of me.’

Since the term hybridity has become a buzzword in recent cultural and literary criticism, the aim of this volume is to re-visit the concept and to critically assess its role in contemporary cultural and literary studies by presenting new theoretical positions and a series of case studies exploring a variety of narratives of contemporary hybridity from the various literary traditions of Britain, North America, and the post-colonial world. We are using the term post-colonial here in the specific manner John Thieme outlines in Post-Colonial Studies when he discusses the function of the hyphen in the word. Referring to Bill Ashcroft, Thieme argues that the post-colonial denotes a ‘specific set of practices that are grounded in “the discursive and material effects of the historical ‘fact’ of colonialism”’ rather than a blanket term for all kinds of cultural differences and marginalities. Correspondingly, we would like to propose that hybridity, in our framework, does not mean any given mixing of cultural materials, backgrounds, or identities, but implies a markedly unbalanced relationship.

2 Rajendran, pp.17-8.
3 Rajendran, p.18.
While the term hybridity has a vexed and debated history, the articles in this collection show its relevance in approaching a variety of phenomena ranging from ethnic writing and theatre to contemporary cinema in a world characterized by transnational migration and the globalization of culture. What the individual contributions share is an interest in emergent cultural phenomena stemming from cultural contact and mixing. Rather than being merely celebratory, however, they also reveal that hybridity is a site of transformation and change where fixed identities based on essentialisms are called into question. Homi K. Bhabha, the foremost theorist of hybridity, describes this space as a ‘stairwell’:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, presents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy[.].

As several cultural critics, from Stuart Hall and Arjun Appadurai to Néstor García Canclini and Avtar Brah, have shown, the contemporary world is characterized by transnational migrations, cultural appropriations, and diasporic peoples, all contributing to increased cultural contact and mixing, and to the intermingling of the local and the global. While the term as such has gained an ambiguously prominent standing in recent criticism, the contributions to this volume seek to show that the concept can be approached critically without losing sight of the psychological pains that diaspora, forced migration and exile generate, and of the historical and cultural contexts in which such narratives of the intercultural emerge. We also hope that we are not guilty of what R. Radhakrishnan finds faulty in ‘metropolitan’ theorists: ‘[T]heir celebration of “difference” is completely at odds with the actual experience of difference as undergone by diasporic peoples in their countries of residence.’ This reservation is all the more important as an ethics of investigation, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warns against the dangers of ‘triumphalist self-declared hybrid[ity]’ of ‘the postmodern postcolonialist’ for ‘the implicit collaboration of the postcolonial in the service of neo-colonialism.’

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Approaching Hybridity

As a critical term, hybridity is often discussed in connection with a set of other terms denoting ‘intercultural transfer’ and the forms of identity such a change generates: the three other key terms include syncretism, mestizaje (or métissage) and creolization.\(^8\) It has been suggested that syncretism often describes the cultural mixing evident in the religious and musical traditions in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean: as Andrea Schwieger Hiepko points out, in Afro-Cuban religion West African deities are ‘projected onto’ Catholic saints.\(^9\) Creolization is often understood as a general (but often seen as peculiar to the Caribbean region) process of ‘intermixing and cultural change that products a Creole society.’\(^10\) This suggests a process in which a new identity is formed from various cultural roots including European, African, and Native Caribbean. For instance, Edward Kamau Brathwaite argues that a Creole society is constructed in and through the interaction between the whites and the blacks in the slave society of Jamaica: as the various groups ‘adapt themselves to the new environment and to each other,’\(^11\) a new identity emerges.

The history of the terms hybridity and métissage has been shown to be connected to the discourses of the biological sciences. The hybrid is commonly thought to be a cross between two different species (botanical or animal), but owing to colonialist ideologies of race emphasising the alleged purity of the white colonizers the terms were understood in a negative manner. While hybridization suggests ‘fertilization against natural tendencies,’ métissage was once used to refer to ‘the hybridization of human beings implicating a distinction into different races.’\(^12\) As the traditional usage of the concept of hybridity is embedded in the narratives of evolution, the hybrid was originally conceived of as infertile and often as an inferior copy of the original. Since Western thought interpreted the term in the framework of racial thinking, it has been claimed that the term promotes nineteenth-century ideas of race and miscegenation, and thus it should be treated with caution. Such a view has been presented by Robert J. C. Young, whose *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* discusses the

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\(^9\) Hiepko, p.118.


\(^12\) Hiepko, p.118.
links between ideas of hybridity and mongrelity: ‘Today, therefore, in reinvoking this concept, we are utilizing the vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right as much as the notion of an organic process of the grafting of diversity into singularity.’ For Young, the use of the term suggests that the ideological baggage of the nineteenth century remains with the critic: ‘it always reiterates and reinforces the dynamics of the same conflictual economy whose tensions and divisions it re-enacts.’

In the process of the fallacies of racial thinking being revealed, the terms denoting hybridity have also been redefined. In contemporary cultural theories, as Peter Brooker argues, the original ‘meanings have been extended to refer to the mixed or hyphenated identities of persons or ethnic communities, or of texts which express and explore this condition.’ Furthermore, they are also used in a counterdiscursive manner in order to provide an alternative to the once-dominant narratives praising white supremacy. The case in point is the work of the Chicana critic and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, whose Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza uses the figure of the mestiza to counter dominant views of the role and identity of women in the borderlands. In the words of Anzaldúa, it is in the borderlands where a new identity can be uncovered: ‘a new mestiza consciousness, una conciencia de mujer.’ She describes it in the following manner:

In a constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?

Yet it can be argued that the use of hybridity in literary and cultural texts (including Victorian) shows resistance to the monological raciology of colonial discourse. As Jopi Nyman argues in his studies of colonial animal narratives, and Kipling’s The Jungle Book in particular, the position of Mowgli as linking the worlds of colonizer and colonized, of humans and animals, yet not belonging to either, renders him in this space of liminality where he is able to resist fixed identifications. Correspondingly, Joel

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14 Young, p.27.
17 Anzaldúa, p.78.
18 See Jopi Nyman, Postcolonial Animal Tale from Kipling to Coetzee (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2003), and Jopi Nyman, ‘De/Constructing Hybridity: Reading Animal Writing’, in Representing
Joel Kuortti discusses the importance of the notion of hybridity in Salman Rushdie’s fiction. When Rushdie writes counter-narratives for their colonial, national, and fundamentalist interpretations, he ‘reiterates hybridity as a narratological posture.’ Thus, when read in a framework enabling the birth of what Stuart Hall would refer to as ‘new ethnicities,’ even colonial(ist) narratives are able to produce identity categories and positionalities challenging their overt intentions. Similarly, Nikos Papastergiadis has pointed to the fact that through the use of the term it is possible to address the role of contradictions and difference in the making of identity by saying that hybridity ‘openly acknowledges that identity is constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure.’

Many discussions of the term relate it to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, hybridization is a process involving both linguistic and cultural aspects, and it emerges when different linguistic codes meet with each other. As Sabine Mabardi’s analysis of Bakhtin’s use of the term indicates, in his writings it implies a situation of double-voicedness, where ‘there is a mixture of the authorial language with tracers, or influences, of the other language/voice with which it has dialogized.’ Pnina Werbner defines the term slightly differently: ‘For Bakhtin, hybridisation is the mixture of two languages, an encounter between two different linguistic consciousnesses.’ Werbner suggests that Bakhtin distinguishes between two forms of hybridization: organic (unconscious) and aesthetic (intentional) hybridity. In Werbner’s view, Bakhtin’s unconscious hybridity is a natural process in which one language or culture absorbs elements from the other without

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Gender, Ethnicity and Nation in Word and Image, ed. by Karin Granqvist and Ulrike Spring (Tromsø: University of Tromsø, 2001), pp.41-56.
19 See Joel Kuortti, Fictions to Live In: Narration as an Argument for Fiction in Salman Rushdie’s Novels (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998), and Joel Kuortti, Place of the Sacred: The Rhetoric of the Satanic Verses Affair (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997).
20 Kuortti, Fictions, p.231.
26 Werbner, pp.4-5.
making any fuss about it, whereas intentional hybrids ‘shock, change, challenge, revitalise or disrupt through deliberate, intended fusions’ and in so doing ‘create an ironic double consciousness.’ 27 As a result of Bakhtinian ideas, literary critics have often sought examples of hybridity in the mixed expressions of post-colonial literatures combining Western and non-Western genres, languages, and literary forms. 28

With a reference to the development of musical histories, Simon Featherstone exemplifies the distinction between the two forms of hybridity. While what he calls ‘the great hybrid musics of colonialism and its aftermath – jazz, tango, salsa’ are, as results of non-foreseeable contacts and negotiations (related to the history of the Black Atlantic), examples of the former, today’s aesthetically oriented world-music, such as the co-operation of Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré seeking to unite blues with the musics of West Africa, are intentional hybrids. 29 In the opinion of Featherstone, cultural hybrids of the latter kind – which are typical of postmodernism – pose certain problems for post-colonial studies: ‘The resulting encounters may produce versions of hybridity that are aesthetically pleasing, but they are quite unable to sustain the political and cultural weight and energies that Gilroy, Bakhtin and Ishmael Reed assign to the “unintentional” histories of that process.’ 30 In his critical discussion of the term hybridity in academic discourse, Featherstone argues that present-day critics occasionally use examples of contemporary cultural practices as illustrations of theoretical vocabularies and do not become involved in their analysis. Contrasting the case of Apache Indian, a popular music artist from Birmingham combining Indian and Jamaican music styles who enjoyed a brief period of attention as the embodiment of hybridity in popular music in the 1990s, with the postwar Trinidadian Calypso singer Lord Kitchener whose simple songs of immigrant life in post-1948 Britain mark cultural transitions and express diasporic experiences, Featherstone expresses the necessity of recovering histories of hybridity if we are to understand culture as a whole and its formation. 31 As Featherstone puts it:

Their deceptively inconsequential narratives are often encrypted commentaries on the consequences of that experience, its liberations as well as its privations. Their audiences were also newly internationals – Trinidadian, African and British. Kitchener both acknowledged and developed this network of Black Atlantic culture. His was not a

27 Werbner, p.5.
30 Featherstone, p.46.
31 Featherstone, pp.47-54.
As Featherstone’s analysis shows, cultural hybridity is not only a question of combining different ingredients together to form and celebrate a hyphenated identity, but its analyses show different migrations and mobilities problematizing the histories of contemporary identities. In this process the work of such scholars as Homi K. Bhabha and Paul Gilroy has played a significant role in theoretical discussions of hybridity – indeed, responses to and developments of their work are also central in the articles collected in this volume.

Bhabha’s major contribution is the idea that the intercultural space where hybrid identity is formed is a space of in-betweenness and liminality. To put his complicated argument simply, in what Bhabha calls the ‘Third Space of enunciation,’ the liminal space between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized, migrants and other (post)colonial subjects go through a process that recasts their fixed sense of identity. While this reconstruction of identity may be positive and empowering, its transgressive character and location in the liminal space of borders and boundaries also, as Bhabha writes, poses potential dangers as it generates a new, hybrid subjectivity: ““Beyond” signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary – the very fact of going beyond – are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the “present.”” Thus, to enter the Third Space, while it shows the potentiality of constructing a non-fixed identity, generates a new sense of identity that may resemble the old ones but is not quite the same. Bhabha describes this Third Space of enunciation by using the Freudian term of the uncanny, das Unheimliche, or the ‘unhomely,’ and suggests that what is involved in the construction of hybrid identity is an ‘estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.’

As the unhomely is defined as the ‘paradigmatic colonial and postcolonial condition,’ it is no surprise that one of his examples of narrative texts embodying hybridity is Toni Morrison’s Beloved, a story revisiting histories of terror, violence, and haunting. A similar idea of the emergence of hybrid cultural identity with particular reference to Asian America has been

32 Featherstone, p.54.
33 Bhabha, p.37.
34 Bhabha, p.4.
35 Bhabha, p.9.
36 Bhabha, p.9.
expressed by the writer Meena Alexander: ‘For us, here, the barbed wire is taken into the heart and art grapples with a disorder in society. In our writing, we need to evoke a chaos coequal to the injustices that surround us.’ The significance of hybridity in the making of contemporary identities can be seen in that, while some critics, like Roger Bromley in his study of contemporary diasporic fiction, prefer the concept of syncretism to hybridity, they explicitly frame their study in the cultural borderlands of hyphenated identities: ‘The fictions concentrated on are “borderline” narratives, works of recombination and “hyphenation,” texts of incomplete signification and hybridity: in-between spaces.’

Some critics of Bhabha, such as Aijaz Ahmad and Benita Parry, criticize his theory for its poststructuralist/postmodernist and textual emphasis. Ahmad, for example, argues that Bhabha lives in the same ‘material conditions of postmodernity which presume the benefits of modernity as the very grounds from which judgements on that past of this post- may be delivered,’ and elsewhere argues against the anti-historicality of Bhabha’s post-colonial theory. However, it has also been argued that Bhabha’s notion of the Third Space with its threatening ambivalence can be harnessed for emancipatory purposes and used to uncover narratives of nation: ‘Hybridity is a threat to colonial and cultural authority; it subverts the concept of pure origin or identity of the dominant authority through the ambivalence created by denial, unsettling, repetition, and displacement.’ While the work of Gilroy comes from a different theoretical tradition, relying more on sociological theories of modernity than on psychoanalytical and poststructuralist vocabularies, it is in their critiques of nations and nationalism that the two theorists meet. It is, indeed, these questions that are taken up by contributors to this volume.

In his famous counternarrative of West-centred modernity, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy shows how black Atlantic culture can be seen as a transnational and diasporic phenomenon that has challenged both Euro- and Afrocentric nationalisms. Thus the philosophical and artistic work of intellectuals from Frederick Douglass and

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41 Mabardi, p.6.
W. E. B. Du Bois to Richard Wright is based on the movement and mutual exchange between different spaces and traditions. Britain, Europe, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean have all played a role in this process, and it is not limited to any particular national tradition. In so doing, Gilroy comes to challenge all appeals to national and ethnic purity, and offers an alternative approach to the study of cultural hybridity.

As hybridity has become an accepted and widely-used critical term in recent years, it has been applied to a wide variety of cultural texts and phenomena. For instance, Néstor García Canclini’s influential interpretation of hybridity as a central element in Latin American modernity has been seen as a critical and empirical counterpoint to Bhabha’s psychoanalytically oriented abstract writing. Focusing on the transformation of culture in the US-Mexican borderlands, García Canclini, by applying Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notions of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, shows ‘intercultural hybridity’ at work in different spheres of urban life in Tijuana, where the border experience forms the centre of its inhabitants’ definitions of space and self. To quote García Canclini:

> In the exchanges of traditional symbols with international communications circuits, culture industries, and migrations, questions about identity and the national, the defense of sovereignty, and the unequal appropriation of knowledge and art do not disappear. The conflicts are not erased, as neoconservative postmodernism claims. They are placed in a different register, one that is multifocal and more tolerant, and the autonomy of each culture is rethought – sometimes – with smaller fundamentalist risks.

The existence of such locations of hybridity where the traditional and the new co-exist problematizes standard narratives of modernity and postmodernity by generating ‘mixed times’ where ‘premodernity, modernity and postmodernity [coexist].’ A similar problematization of time can be found in the work of Bhabha: his notion of ‘time-lag’ suggests that the colonial past is present and informs the post-colonial now, that is, in the colonialist stereotype that surfaces in the present and troubles the linearity of modernity by repeating the past. John Kraniuskas suggests that the theories of Bhabha

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45 García Canclini, pp.234-8.
46 García Canclini, pp.240-1.
48 See Bhabha, p.253.
and García Canclini share a belief in what he calls ‘border times,’ non-
Western temporalities that counter the aspirations of Eurocentric narratives of
modernity.  

Through such reconceptualizations of the construction of cultural identity
in contact situations, and also because of the transnationalization of the
disciplines of American Studies and American literature, similar issues of
identity have also been recently addressed in readings of hybrid, mixed-race
or interracial identities, problematizing the traditional maintenance of
allegedly pure categories.  

In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Alexander expresses this problematic issue succinctly: ‘[A]m I American now I have lost my
shining picture? Now I have no home in the old way? Is America this terrible
multiplicity at the heart?’  

American literature, of course, is only one literary
tradition where such processes of hybridization appear: the recent essay
collection *Migrant Cartographies: New Cultural and Literary Spaces in
Post-Colonial Europe*, edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniel Merolla, paves
way for the study – both historical and contemporary – of various emerging
hybrid and transnational literary traditions.  

Similarly, new and promising
areas of application include such fields as the study of sexuality and science
studies, where the truths of narratives about nature have been interrogated,
and the study of virtual realities. The discussions in the articles in this
collection – in their geographical and generic multiplicity – also attest that
such problematization is not restricted by, for example, geography or by
genre.

The power of hybridity can be seen in its ability to question what appears
natural and complete, to problematize naturalized boundaries. As Jan
Nederveen Pieterse expresses the importance of hybridity:

> Acknowledging the contingency of boundaries and the significance and limitations of
> hybridity as a theme and approach means engaging hybridity politics. This is where
critical hybridity comes in, which involves a new awareness of and new take on the

49 Kraniuskas, pp.249-50.
50 See Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial
Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Mixed-Race Literature*, ed. by Jonathan
Brennan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), and Anzaldúa.
51 Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines: A Memoir* (New York: City University of New York and
52 See *Migrant Cartographies: New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*, ed.
by Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla (Lanham: Lexington Books/Rowman and Littlefield,
2005).
53 See *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science and Culture*, ed. by Avtar Brah and Annie
Hybridity Now: Articles and Their Contents

This volume is divided into two parts. In the contributions to the first part, the writers develop theories of hybridity by challenging existing views on hybridity and presenting new perspectives on cultural and literary theorizations of the subject. The second part of the volume then presents a number of case studies which explore hybridity and its representation in a variety of literatures.

The first part of the collection, ‘Reconstructing Theories of Hybridity,’ begins with three reassessments of and challenges to Bhabha’s theorizations of hybridity. It opens with David Huddart’s discussion of the recent writings of Bhabha, produced in anticipation of Bhabha’s forthcoming books *A Measure of Dwelling: Reflections on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism* and *The Right to Narrate*. Huddart pays attention to the ways in which Bhabha develops a practice of critical reading. In this practice, hybridity is understood as intervention rather than a feature of some existing practice, phenomenon, or subject. Furthermore, Huddart points out how this critical practice relates to the discourses connected with human rights. This, then, has very concrete bearings on subalternity in the face of global citizenship.

In her contribution, Sabine Broeck problematizes the metaphoricity of the notion of hybridity. While post-colonial theory often accounts for hybridity in terms of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, there is a very concrete ‘reality of the bastard’ to be faced in the post-colonial world. Broeck takes her lead from Robert J. C. Young’s critique of Bhabha and argues for a more nuanced understanding of hybridity. One particular, and so far neglected, aspect that in Broeck’s view needs to be considered through hybridity is the concept of whiteness.

Dimple Godiwala approaches Bhabha’s theorization especially through the notion of mimicry. She perceives it as an unbalanced notion that does not mean the same for the hegemonic white as for the subaltern post-colonial. Godiwala considers the *performative mimicry* of post-colonial cultural texts in terms of either the *linguistic-cultural performative* or the *ideological-cultural performative* and sees texts like Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* as ambivalent. Like Broeck, Godiwala calls for a more concrete consideration of the biological hybrids.

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In Jeroen Dewulf’s article, the notion of hybridity is discussed in terms of anthropophagy. The organizing idea that all languages are hybrid, or creole, is developed through a consideration of the German language. The idea of pure language and its originality is contested through analyses of Brazilian materials: the Tuparí people, Brazilian modernist fiction, and anthropophagical mythology. Dewulf suggests that an anthropophagical interpretation of languages, cultures, and identities is both truthful – since it acknowledges the true course of their development and construction – and ethically valuable – since it resists monological truths and absolute, singular identities.

Paul Sharrad writes about strategic hybridity in his article on Pacific interpretations of post-colonial theory. Playing explicitly with Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism, Sharrad suggests that the many and varied uses and misuses of the term hybridity may successfully be used in a strategic manner. Through an assessment of particularly Pacific materials, Sharrad argues that the ambivalence of the metaphoricity and reality of the term is such that it is open for re-translation in new situations, and while sometimes there may be losses in its application, at other times there will be gains. Sharrad maintains Pnina Werbner’s idea of hybridity as processual, and vouches for an understanding of the multiplicity of hybridity.

The first part concludes with Andrew Blake’s discussion of postalgia. Blake reads Gilroy’s recent book After Empire and the cycle of Matrix films by the Wachowski Brothers. Blake sees Gilroy’s work as an alternative to the prevalent post-colonial application of hybridity. Gilroy employs the term melancholia to discuss the post-post-colonial anti-nostalgia in popular culture, and Blake perceives in Gilroy’s writing a clear sense of – at least partly unfounded – anti-Americanism. In the Matrix films then Blake sees an ambivalent, complex engagement with, and contestation of, any simplistic understanding of cultural imperialism. Challenging simplistic anti-American attitudes towards American popular culture, Blake anticipates that the Matrix in its ambiguous Americanness offers an American postalgia instead of British nostalgia.

The second part of the collection, ‘Reading Hybridity,’ includes eight articles that take up a more textual approach to reconsider the notion of hybridity. The first contribution in the second part is by Zoe Trodd, who looks at Native American autobiographies and the issue of cultural hybridity. In her discussion, Trodd considers the collaborative autobiographies of William Apess, Black Elk and Mary Crow Dog as hybrid constructions that are heterotopic renditions in which a multiplicity of voices exist. Trodd describes the dialogic encounter between the autobiographers and their collaborators as an open curve where the past informs the present and creates the future in an infinite regression.
Questions of race and mixed race subjectivity are dealt with in Sheng-mei Ma’s article. Ma discusses the ways in which Asian American multiracial reality is reflected in three instances: in the diametrically opposed identity strategies of the Eaton sisters, Onoto Watanna and Sui Sin Far; in the genre of *lomansu*, or interracial romance; and in interracial theatre by the playwrights Velina Hasu Houston and Dmae Roberts. In these instances, Ma argues, the problematics of Asian American mixed race discourse is shown to be a Sisyphian task contesting issues of racism, passing, and ambiguous identity.

Jopi Nyman analyses the issue of Asian American subjectivity in Cynthia Kadohata’s first novel *The Floating World*. Nyman argues that the haunting presence of the past in the form of the unhomeliness of home underlines the traumatic experiences of hybrid diasporic identity. Analysing the construction of the immigrant subject and the diasporic hybrid space of America, he shows how Kadohata problematizes the ideas of pure identity, closure and uninterrupted transition. Nyman’s analysis of hybridity seeks to discuss the ambivalence of hybrid time and space through the writings of Walter Benjamin.

The close textual analysis by Joel Kuortti of Jhumpa Lahiri short story ‘This Blessed House’ brings forth the problems of hybrid identity. Applying the somewhat metaphorical concept of cultural translation, Kuortti demonstrates how Lahiri invokes diasporic identity as a translated site of hybridity. There is a constant negotiation between the different parts – times, cultures, locations – of a person’s life, with many ways to confront this dilemma. In Kuortti’s analysis, Lahiri’s story opens up avenues in which post-colonial hybrid identity can reverse the colonial hierarchy to carve out a new self.

Andrew Hammond’s article takes up Hanif Kureishi’s screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* and discusses it in the context of Margaret Thatcher’s Britain. Hammond shows how Kureishi’s text, along with his other texts such as *The Buddha of Suburbia*, displays a frustration with, and contestation of, British politics concerning immigrants and multiculturalism. Although Kureishi has been criticized for his alleged leanings towards hegemonic Western models, Hammond argues that his works nevertheless offer a valuable analysis of the problems of hybrid subjectivity.

While Hammond discusses Kureishi’s screenplay, Valerie Kaneko Lucas in her article takes up two contemporary plays that deal with the ways in which Black Britons and British Asians negotiate hybrid cultural identities. The plays in question are *Fix Up*, by Kwame Kwei-Armah, and *Fragile Land*, by Tanika Gupta. Lucas sees both plays as expressions of a feeling of loss in view of their characters’ hybrid identities. However, they do make an
In his contribution, Samir Dayal discusses Rushdie’s novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. A major concern in Dayal’s analysis is the ethical dimension of hybridity in the discourse on ethnicity. The hybrid minority subject position exemplified by the character of the Moor shows how difficult such a position is and what frustration and distress it causes. Dayal argues that Rushdie’s novel speaks for the importance of ethico-political commitment to social justice in order to achieve cultural pluralism. He is also critical of the achievement of the novel, as he sees ambiguities in its own commitment to this ethics.

The anthology’s concluding article by Mita Banerjee analyses Kureishi’s novel *Gabriel’s Gift* and Rushdie’s novel *Fury*. Like Hammond and Dayal, Banerjee also perceives problems in the texts of Rushdie and Kureishi, especially in the way they represent the otherness of postcommunist Eastern Europeans. Banerjee argues that both novels, while allegedly post-colonially postethnic, at the same time seem to revert to colonial, Orientalist manners of representation. She considers the ethics of post-colonial literature and discusses the possibilities and pitfalls of hybridity in the new millennium.

**Towards the Zone of Hybridity**

Owing to the character of the present anthology, hybridity seems to obtrude as something in itself, an entity or theory on its own. This is not, however, the case. Hybridity as we see it does not constitute a separate field or spell out interests of its own kind. It stems from and is thus closely linked with different fields of inquiry. In this context of reconsiderations of hybridity, we connect it especially with American Studies and Post-colonial Studies, although, as we have already noted about American literature, these do not saturate or pre-empt the notion. As the subtitle of this collection signals, the articles in this volume are studies of cultural transitions, and they also pave way for further transitions in the field of postcolonial studies. Indeed, the best attestation of the relevance of the notion of hybridity is the array of articles in this collection. They take critical looks at hybridity and give back challenging reconsiderations of it – and they all do this within specific contexts.

The joint effort in this volume to reconsider hybridity in its limitations, challenges, and potential is not meant to be a mere intellectual exercise. In the articles one can also read a strong ethical note which we share. In connection with the post-colonial, as Frantz Fanon defines it, it is never a
specific moment but an ongoing struggle, a continual emergence, a ‘zone of occult instability.’ Likewise, what we wish to emphasize with this collection is the possibility of hybridity as such a zone where people can meet – themselves or each other – and where ‘our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light.’

While the Introduction has been written in collaboration, Jopi Nyman has drafted the text for the general introduction while Joel Kuortti has drawn together the synopses for the articles. The editors should like to express their gratitude to the Academy of Finland (Project 205780) for funding the research of which the anthology is a part. We should also like to thank Ms. Anne Karhapää for her assistance in preparing the final manuscript.

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Part One
Reconstructing Theories of Hybridity
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Hybridity and Cultural Rights: Inventing Global Citizenship

David Huddart

Abstract

This article examines the contribution that Homi K. Bhabha’s understanding of hybridity makes to discussion of cultural rights and global citizenship. It argues that the postcolonial perspective renders these entities uncanny through its insistence on process and retrospective construction. The article pursues a close reading of selected recent writings by Bhabha, situating them in the context of ideas drawn from the work of Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor. In doing so, it also reconsiders key ideas from Bhabha’s work, suggesting that his conceptualisation of hybridity is less celebratory and more strictly critical than is often assumed. There has been much scepticism about the ‘hybridity paradigm’ advanced by postcolonial theory, specifically relating to its relevance in an avowedly transformed world. Bhabha’s recent work demonstrates the consistency with which this paradigm challenges us to re-think important issues relating to globalization, democracy, cultural rights and global citizenship. In short, the hybridity paradigm supplements discourses of cultural rights and global citizenship.

Introduction

The notion of hybridity has become central to cultural theory, although its merits have been controversial. In postcolonial criticism in particular, the term has been criticised for exemplifying a particular postmodern critical position. And, within postcolonial criticism, it is the work of Homi K. Bhabha that seems to draw the most attention, much of it rather hostile. I will argue that Bhabha’s work, with its emphasis on hybridity, is much more complex and productive than it has appeared, and to make this argument I will follow the intricacies of his more recent discussions of cultural rights. First, however, it is necessary to revisit the question of exactly what Bhabha means by hybridity, something too easily taken as read. Bhabha’s work is closely identified with the position that contemporary cultures are hybrid. However, this position does not imply that cultural difference simply blurs into ‘indifference.’ Instead, cultures should be seen as retrospective constructions, meaning that they are consequences of historical process. Hybridity is a process, and its study requires a certain kind of critical approach, one typified by Bhabha’s own difficult work. Interviewed for the journal Art in America, he suggests the following about his own writing:

The postcolonial perspective resists attempts at holistic forms of social explanation. I question the traditional liberal attempt to negotiate a coming together of minorities on the basis of what they have in common and what is consensual. In my writing, I’ve been arguing against the multiculturalist notion that you can put together harmoniously any
number of cultures in a pretty mosaic. You cannot just solder together different cultural traditions to produce some brave new cultural totality. The current phase of economic and social history makes you aware of cultural difference not at the celebratory level of diversity but always at the point of conflict or crisis.1

Here Bhabha is making a strong connection between totalising theories and one version of multiculturalism, which imagines a telos of cultural harmonization: cultural diversity as opposed to cultural difference. However, the final sentence emphasizes the fact that those disparate cultures are not pre-existing, but are instead an effect of historical change, specifically of colonialism and postcolonialism: that is what is meant by the ‘point of conflict or crisis.’ Cultural hybridity is not therefore something absolutely general: it may appear to go all the way down, in all cultures, but that would indeed blur all difference into indifference. That version of the politics of difference undermines critical differentiation and distinction. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity denies that there were bounded and self-present cultures that at a later date became hybrid; he thereby retains a critical perspective, and resists a facile relativism. We can see this in ‘Signs Taken for Wonders,’ where he writes the following:

[C]olonial hybridity is not a problem of genealogy or identity between two different cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism. Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition. Again, it must be stressed, it is not simply the content of disavowed knowledges – be they forms of cultural otherness or traditions of colonialist treachery – that return to be acknowledged as counter-authorities. For the resolution of conflicts between authorities, civil discourse always maintains an adjudicative procedure. What is irremediably estranging in the presence of the hybrid – in the revaluation of the symbol of national authority as the sign of colonial difference – is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated.2

This passage clarifies two significant points. First, when we study hybridity we do not start with two or more cultures, and then trace their historical movements of hybridization. In the colonial situation, the production of cultures is an inevitable consequence of contested authority. So, as is well known, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’ explores attempts to impose the so-called English Book: an apparently absolute cultural difference is actually a product of the strategies adopted by both sides. In different ways, the two different cultures are ‘not the source of conflict’ but are instead ‘the

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2 Homi K. Bhabha, Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), p.114; emphasis original.
effect of discriminatory practices. We have to recognise that cultures are effects of stabilization produced by authority, but that recognition does not make those cultures any less real. The second point is the following: this shift of emphasis needs to be incorporated into our accounts of culture, so we cannot take discussions of cultural difference at face value, and we cannot write as if different cultures simply exist for us to study disinterestedly and discreetly. Bhabha believes that hybridity calls into question traditional analyses of colonialism, which tend to merely reverse the terms of colonial knowledge. Again, hybridity is not a consequence of other, apparently ‘pure’ positions that have been, for one reason or another, thrust together.

The consequences of Bhabha’s position are multiple, and of course the position itself is not without its complexities and controversies. Nonetheless, its implications can be traced in particular contexts, and Bhabha himself has recently pursued them through cultural rights. If cultures are hybrid in the way I have described, then this hybridity cannot only be confined to the level of culturalist discourses. This hybridity is found in many unexpected locations, for example in discussion of technological change. In the context of comments on Jacques Derrida, Bhabha expresses reservations about what might be called the digital technological imaginary:

If the virtual community shares the essential temporal structure of the modern national-form and its social imaginary, then what will prevent the reproduction on the Net of the worst excesses of nationalism and xenophobia? the agonisms of center and periphery? the travails of majoritarianism and minoritarianism? Although cyberspace communities do not have the territorial imperatives of nationalism, it is interesting how active xenophobic nationalists are on the Web, often in the cause of nations to which they no longer belong, but to which they now turn to justify their fundamentalist aspirations.

In certain ways, then, Bhabha is suspicious of the ideologies of digital capitalism, ideologies that obscure homologies of temporality quite in keeping with the reproduction and extension of modernity’s worst features. It is important to maintain that stress on temporality, however, for Bhabha is not being simply dismissive of these ideologies. To explain what I mean, first it is necessary to recall how Bhabha understands national narrative, which is, as is well known, both pedagogical and performative. The first ‘teaches’ the nation-people as a bounded, self-identical formation, moving through empty, homogeneous time. The second, meanwhile, emphasises the myriad ways that this national identity is tweaked everyday, sometimes violently transformed. The first is a question of being, the second of becoming or

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3 Bhabha, *Location*, p.114; emphasis original.
doing. For the pedagogical, the nation moves through time but remains untouched by it, unmoved by the diversity and disjunction of multiple times. The performative, on the other hand, reintroduces these multiple times, and so reintroduces a sense of community-in-process. While the pedagogical is from the start drawn into an economy of the performative, the two remaining locked together, there is no doubt that Bhabha generally places more emphasis on the performative, because that is what is denied or excluded in the attitudes against which he writes. Accordingly, if virtual communities seem to reproduce the pedagogical structure, and deny the performative, this can only be a problem. So, although we can imagine a version of global citizenship enabled by accelerated changes in communications technologies, there are ways in which such changes might actually reproduce some of the least desirable features of imagined communities. This reproduction is hardly inevitable, of course, and in much the same way discourses of universal rights, although often implying the normativity of national belonging, are open to hybridization, as I will suggest.

Bhabha’s interrogation of rights discourses actually derives from his questioning of that pedagogical understanding of the nation-people. Modernity, he implies, has been conceived in much the same way as a nation – in other words, modernity has been unproblematically seen as essentially European. A properly historical perspective on modernity must incorporate its excluded disjunctive or ‘ unofficial’ histories, and the discourse of rights must look to its own excluded but necessary peoples. Accordingly, the discourse of cultural rights is another location where the notion of hybridity can be put to work, following some of Bhabha’s own suggestions. For example, in *The Location of Culture* he writes the following:

> Current debates in postmodernism question the cunning of modernity – its historical ironies, its disjunctive temporalities, its paradoxes of progress, its representational aporia. It would profoundly change the values, and judgements, of such interrogations, if they were open to the argument that metropolitan histories of civitas cannot be conceived without evoking the savage colonial antecedents of the ideals of civility. It also suggests, by implication, that the language of rights and obligations, so central to the modern myth of a people, must be questioned on the basis of the anomalous and discriminatory legal and cultural status assigned to migrant, diasporic, and refugee populations. Inevitably, they find themselves on the frontiers between cultures and nations, often on the other side of the law.  

Under globalisation, the international language of rights apparently undermines the centrality of the nation state. However, at the same time this language develops out of liberal assumptions about internationalism. One version of liberalism sees internationalism as, predictably and reasonably, the

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5 Bhabha, *Location*, p.175.
interplay of pre-existent nations, and so, in terms of cultural rights, of national cultures. Bhabha’s concern is that this language does not adequately cover many of the people most in need of protection, precisely because they cannot be so straightforwardly located within any national culture. Accordingly, the migrant perspective has to be incorporated into discussions of rights. Further, there is something about the migrant perspective on cultural rights in particular that gets to the heart of the problem. But that assumes that there is a problem, which is to assume too much: so, to fully appreciate the importance of the migrant perspective, we need first to look at human rights discourses.

A Liberal Formulation of Minority Rights

The last twenty years have seen increased liberal philosophical development of frameworks on minority rights, development complementing that of legal provision. A leading thinker in this area has been Will Kymlicka, whose work will be discussed here as a useful introduction to Bhabha’s own perspective. Kymlicka’s thought operates in a framework of nations, and his conception of minority rights works against the idea of the nation as neutral space. Rather than assuming that a nation’s institutions are ethnoculturally neutral, for Kymlicka it is important to acknowledge that within such institutions there is a process of nation-building at work, producing what he calls societal cultures: ‘a territorially-concentrated culture, centred on a shared language which is used in a wide range of societal institutions, in both private and public life (schools, media, law, economy, government, etc.).’

Claims to minority rights are reactions to this ‘invisible’ or unremarked nation-building process, and accordingly are not a question of special treatment but rather equal opportunity. Such demands are, then, consistent with classical liberal principles. Kymlicka writes the following: ‘All else being equal, national minorities should have the same tools of nation-building available to them as the majority nation, subject to the same liberal limitations.’

Kymlicka’s discussion explicitly operates in the context of the nation; additionally, his discussion makes at least some reference to practical policy, and has implications for the reformulation of such policy. Given this emphasis, Kymlicka’s examples are what he defines as ‘standard’ cases, and he specifies three central examples of minority rights demands:

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7 Kymlicka, Politics, p.29.
ethnoreligious sects, immigrants, and national minorities. Kymlicka acknowledges that many other examples are significantly more complex than these three standard examples, and he suggestively refers to these other cases as ‘in-between’ cases. However, he insists, the standard cases will help us think about the complex in-between cases because, ‘the demands of in-between groups are often a complex hybrid of different (and sometimes contradictory) elements drawn from the more familiar models of ethnoreligious marginalization, immigrant integration, and separatist nationalism.’ In other words, these standard examples will contain all the constituent aspects of the more complex cases. This use of examples would not seem quite so obvious to Bhabha, as I will suggest. Further, it is well known that Bhabha’s work also questions the defaulting of so many discussions into nation-state terms. At the same time, there are clear points of contact between Kymlicka’s liberal formulation of minority rights and Bhabha’s discussions, and these points of contact have only become clearer as Bhabha has discussed cultural rights more explicitly in recent work. In this specific context, one point of contact is the mobilisation of the term hybridity: it is interesting that Kymlicka should use the term ‘hybrid’ to characterize the complex cases which might divert us from our standard cases, but he does not follow through the implications of this use. Bhabha’s sense of hybridity would refer not only to the complexity of certain demands for rights, but also the complexly hybrid histories from which those demands issue.

In one sense hybridization is everyday banality, and so many of the least extreme examples can quite easily focus debate on minority rights. At the same time, hybridization is not only everyday banality, especially not in terms of international law. Those extreme, in-between cases that Kymlicka explicitly brackets are not merely complex versions of the nominally standard cases he does consider. Those cases, suspended in-between nations, are not exceptions but are increasingly the norm, especially for a language of human rights that ought to operate transnationally rather than internationally. Minority rights can and must be thought of in terms of national frameworks, as explored in liberal philosophy; however, they must also be thought of in terms that exceed nations, and this is because so many people are being excluded and written off as excessive to nations. This raises the question of how to revise such discourses. The question is usefully approached in the context of cultural rights, and this is where Bhabha makes his contribution. If cultures are, as Bhabha suggests, the consequence of hybridising processes, then this demands a rethinking of international rights discourses.

8 Kymlicka, Politics, p.31.
The most direct and predictable way to approach such discourses is to consider the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights.’ As is well known, Article 27(1) of the Universal Declaration, specifically protecting cultural rights, says the following: ‘Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.’ The status of this ‘community’ is apparently open, but perhaps rather easily defaults to the national community. Costas Douzinas makes the following comment about the production of human rights discourse in the period after 1945: ‘While the major powers fought tooth and nail over the definitions and priorities of human rights, they unanimously agreed that these rights could not be used to pierce the shield of national sovereignty.’ This problem has particular significance when it comes to cases in, for example, a war crimes tribunal. The International Criminal Court was set up by treaty in 1998, and yet the US (and six other countries) voted against the treaty, apparently because of fears that politically motivated accusations would be made against the US military. It seems that the priority of the nation remains in place, and might well impede the processes of justice. For Bhabha, this priority of the nation is a problem in a different way. For him, article 27 operates on the assumption that there are well-defined and bounded cultures, an assumption that the idea of hybridity undermines. If such an assumption remains in place, then human rights discourses will retain certain structural problems making them inadequate to the tasks for which they have been formulated.

For example, in ‘On Minorities: Cultural Rights,’ Bhabha begins by exploring two terms derived from the work of Charles Taylor, who writes of the ‘whole society’ being achieved through the exclusion of ‘partial milieux.’ On this view a whole society is essentially a national society, achieved through the assimilation of minority identities, thought of as ‘partial milieux.’ In much the same way, Article 27, Bhabha suggests, places emphasis on the preservation of majoritarian identities at the expense of the minoritarian. Article 27, it seems, is unconcerned with the production of minoritarian identity, implying rather that such identity is an excess that is always to be assimilated. However, given the alleged focus of such international agreements, they are too quick to take nation-state organizations as natural. In one way, this assumption merely reminds us that international agreements are simply agreements between nations. Nonetheless, another

sense of ‘between nations’ is what concerns Bhabha: people who are, for various reasons, between nations legally, culturally, or otherwise. These in-between people are not only marginal examples, unimportant to the central business of human rights discourses. In fact, ‘partial milieux,’ apparently destined for assimilation, are increasingly both intra- and internationally central; according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the end of 2004, the number of ‘People of concern to UNHCR’ was 19.2 million.\(^\text{12}\) It would seem that if cultures are to be protected, this protection must be extended beyond national cultures.

It is clear that Bhabha’s ideas about the hybrid and the national could transform cultural rights discussion, and this potential transformation derives from his balanced understanding of the pedagogical and the performative. In Bhabha’s conception of national narration, its movements are simultaneously pedagogical and performative. As in his discussion of national narratives, when Bhabha discusses cultural rights it is clear that a precarious balance between the two is necessary: here it is reformulated in terms of individual and collective rights. Bhabha writes that, ‘[t]he property of the human being is the collective or the transindividual construction of her or his individual autonomy; and the value of human agency arises from the fact that no one can be liberated by others, although no one can liberate herself or himself without others.’\(^\text{13}\) In other words, human rights discourses and institutions simultaneously require what we might call a poetic individualism and a governing, administrative rationality. So, on the one hand there is a poetic element that exceeds legal frameworks, figuring the individual’s irreducibility to mere example of the group; on the other hand, this singularity is simultaneously drawn into the administrative and the pedagogical. This is of course a level of discussion seemingly far removed from concrete legislation, and indeed the practical implications of hybridity for cultural rights usually remain implicit; nonetheless, there are sufficient pointers for us to draw certain conclusions:

The creation of new minorities reveals a liminal, interstitial public sphere that emerges *in-between* the state and the non-state, *in-between* individual rights and group needs; not in the simpler dialectic between global and local. Subjects of cultural rights occupy an analytic and ethical borderland of ‘hybridization’ in a partial and double identification across minority milieux. In fact, the prevailing school of legal opinion specifically describes minority cultural rights as assigned to ‘hybrid’ subjects who stand somewhere in-between individual needs and obligations, and collective claims and choices, in partial milieux.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Bhabha, ‘On Minorities’, p. 6.
\(^\text{14}\) Bhabha, ‘On Minorities’, pp.4-5; emphasis original.
The minoritarian perspective entails a thinking of what Bhabha calls the social as processual or performative. Bhabha’s article actually distinguishes between *thinking* the problem and *describing* it. The first is a matter for poetry, the second for law: we are invited to see a difference between intervening in a situation and describing the situation. The poetic translation of the partial, dependent identification of the minority is the former: the minoritarian is not a matter of essence (pedagogy) but of practice (performativity). The elevation of the poetic in this context is both fascinating and surprising, and requires some more detailed exploration.

### Cultural Rights and the Poetic

In his Oxford Amnesty Lecture, Bhabha returns to the distinction between the pedagogical and the performative. He suggests that the first is on the side of law and the second is on the side of literature. However, this is no simple hierarchy – a fact easy to miss when reading his work. Bhabha asks: ‘Can the culture of rights and the writing of culture be made to converse with each other, to convey, in collaboration, the human spirit?’\(^{15}\) It is worth stating that his criticisms of human rights discourse do not constitute a dismissal of that discourse. Accordingly, the answer to his question is that the categories of rights and writing *must* be brought together constructively.

Again, Bhabha considers Taylor’s thoughts on partial milieux. In Bhabha’s reading, Taylor conceives of respect due to ‘whole’ societies, their wholeness partially dependent on longevity and holism. For Bhabha, Taylor’s conception is only the latest example of how human rights discourse betrays, ‘an inability to conceive of the “cultural options of the minority” outside of the national, even nationalist, frame.’\(^{16}\) References to whole societies always imply the national. There is, in fact, a ‘prescriptive imperative to nationhood and national culture,’\(^{17}\) evidenced by early attempts by some nations to amend the Universal Declaration so that immigrants would not be considered minorities. Article 27 still, however, elevates a notion of stability for minority cultures distant from the realities of many partial milieux. The Universal Declaration is what it says it is: universal, and therefore applicable to humans everywhere. However, its universality is deceptively complex. Although emphasis on the most general level of being human, the ‘merely human,’ would seem to forestall any recourse to discourses of nationalism,

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\(^{16}\) Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.166.

\(^{17}\) Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.167.
Bhabha maintains that behind this most general vocabulary there is a familiar figure: ‘it is my view that behind the “universal” language of the merely human there is a very specific idea of a “national” culture that becomes the inevitable basis of cultural judgement and cultural justice.’ Even if the figure of the nation is only implicit, it is still effectively normative: there is an unspoken expectation that we will all belong to a nation, however complex such belonging may be. Of course, clearly we do not all belong to nations in the same way, and those of us who do are intuitively least likely to require the protection of the Universal Declaration. Further, there are other problems related to this implicit presence of the nation in a discourse of supposed absolute generality, and these problems are problems of *time*. The problem is one of what Bhabha calls, summarizing Joseph Raz, ‘tension in the creation of community.’ Of course tense negotiation – agonism – is for Bhabha both necessary and ongoing. Such agonism is best exemplified in the migrant experience, it might be argued. While we should not romanticize the migrant – and should always remember that there is no one kind of migrant – we should remain open to the perspectives opened by experiences of migrancy. Unsurprisingly, for Bhabha there is a lesson for human rights culture in the problems of minority cultures. Unlike Kymlicka, who relegates the significance of hybrid, in-between examples, Bhabha makes them central. Such cultures have, he writes, ‘a profound sense of the partial and the processual in the self-fashioning of political subjecthood and cultural identification.’ To understand hybridity as process, we need to look in this context to minoritarian perspectives.

To explain how Bhabha understands this process, we can look to dictionary definitions, specifically of the ‘mere’ to which we refer when we say ‘merely human.’ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives us our everyday sense of ‘nothing less than,’ or ‘nothing more than.’ It also gives us the archaic or dialectal sense of ‘boundary’ or ‘landmark,’ sometimes even a ‘green balk or road, serving as a boundary.’ Bhabha is interested in possible interplay between the modern and archaic meanings, although he does not mention the sense of a *road* serving as a boundary, a sense which helpfully reinforces his argument. He argues that, ‘[w]e continually shuttle between these two meanings in the making of culture – the human as an ethical or moral horizon beyond everyday life, and the human as constituted through the process of historical and social time.’ This structure is again that of the

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19 Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.171.
Hybridity and Cultural Rights

pedagogical and the performative, the former associated with universal humanity, the latter with quotidian humanity. Universal categories are necessary constructions that we know will necessarily fail to account for every last example of individual human agency. Accordingly, there is a need for translation between the two levels of description. This translation or shuttling is precisely the movement between pedagogy and performative that seems to organise Bhabha’s work in general. In terms of national narrative, the pedagogical seems to be all that is necessary for the sense of the nation-people, but is in fact continually drawn into an economy of the performative, and the same is true here:

In complex multicultural societies, the ‘culture of humanity’ requires that we continually translate the ‘merely’ human, the more metaphysical sense of meaning and identity, into ‘mere humanity’ as the border between various social and historical forces that produce the ‘human’ as a multicultural category.23

Both senses of being human need to be retained, allowing the open poetic becoming of culture to coexist with its necessary institutional defence. And, in terms of rights discourses, minority group rights must retain both individual and group levels.

Gender and Hybrid Cultures

Perhaps this discussion too readily assumes the desirability of minority group rights. There are, after all, well-developed objections to the idea of such rights, often focusing on the apparent neglect of the individual level. For example, many liberal thinkers question the defence of minority cultures when these cultures apparently conflict with majority attitudes. This conflict is often explored in the context of gender issues, as in the question asked by Susan Moller Okin: ‘Is multiculturalism bad for women?’24 Okin engages specifically with Kymlicka’s work. Her suggestion is that feminism and multiculturalism are not by any means coterminous. She argues this because although minority groups would still be fulfilling the same criteria as the majority culture when it comes to the public sphere (politics), there are no guarantees of that fulfilment in the private sphere (the home). In other words, because gender inequality is often a feature of the private sphere, for example in terms of reproduction, it is possible that group rights will defend gendered cultures – minority cultures that can be much more heavily gendered than the

23 Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.171.
majority liberal culture. Okin considers examples like child marriage and polygamy, around which minority cultures come into direct conflict with majority liberal cultures. These cultural phenomena, continues Okin, may be defended by the (often male/aging) leadership of a minority culture, but women (particularly young women) often see them in a different light. Okin suggests that, ‘by failing to protect women and sometimes children of minority cultures from male and sometimes maternal violence, cultural defences violate their rights to the equal protection of the laws.’

In other words, cultural rights are potentially in conflict with individual legal rights. In ‘Liberal Complacencies,’ Kymlicka responds to Okin by arguing that group rights are only permissible when they are claimed to defend a vulnerable minority culture against the majority culture. They are not permissible if they impose restrictions within the minority cultural group.

Bhabha’s response to Okin is quite different. Elsewhere Bhabha discusses the importance of the domestic sphere in the rewriting of law, politics, and the public sphere. Bhabha obviously, then, has sympathy for aspects of Okin’s argument; however, he suggests that Okin’s perspective is comparable to that of patriarchal minority group leaders, in that she imagines minority groups to be external to or isolated from ‘the great storm of Western progress.’

Minority cultures are, Bhabha suggests, given essential identities which mean they are never quite part of present historical processes: majority discussion of minority cultures is too frequently ‘allochroic.’ Okin’s argument is one version of this discussion: instead of seeing minority cultures as being part of the same processes as majority cultures, there is an implied distance. Okin then casts all relations between liberal majorities and minority cultures in terms of conflict, without thought for the liberalisms already present within minority cultures. These minority liberalisms have, Bhabha insists, for a long time debated the de facto inequalities that continue in Western liberal cultures, despite their legal provisions for equality. More importantly, these minority liberalisms are examples of cultures on the move, progressing in ways that are not simply measurable against the standards of Western liberalism. Of course there is nothing to stop the leaders in any given culture defining that culture as just as stable and fixed as nationalism claims nations to be. This raises the question of who controls any given culture’s stories. It can be argued that his work neglects gender issues, but here at least Bhabha

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25 Okin, on-line.


engages with the question of the gendered control of cultural self-definitions. Bhabha is making the case for recognising the processes animating minority cultures, implying a right to free up the stories told about those cultures, and the standards by which they might be judged. In short, he is discussing minority cultures in terms of a right to narrate.

Cultural Narration

We are able to understand Bhabha’s discussion of cultural rights in terms of cultures in process – or cultures as being narrated. So, Bhabha has recently written of a right to narrate, something very familiar from his work on the nation but perhaps less familiar in this context. Again, Bhabha approaches some of his questions through unexpected avenues, for example developing the idea of the right to narrate through discussion of Adrienne Rich’s poem ‘Inscriptions’ (1995). Bhabha is fascinated by the poem’s insertion of the second person into the first, i.e., its introduction of the temporal dimension. Rich’s poem is a meditation on the individual and belonging, specifically around questions of ‘Race class…all that.’ Bhabha suggests that Rich’s poem shows us, ‘that to belong to a movement, in the collective or political sense of the word, demands a renewed sense of self-recognition that disturbs the language of self and Other, of individual and group.’ In other words, to belong to a movement is also to be in movement. Bhabha refers to ‘a negotiated (un)settlement […] between the subject as first person – I – confronted by its split double – You – that is future’s part, the politicised “person to come.”’ Through Rich’s poem Bhabha evokes the sense in which cultural rights are not a question of multicultural rights, but of intercultural rights. Rich works to open ‘the space of what I call a chiasmatic, diagonally crossed, lateral “side-by-side” solidarity where differences do not aspire to be represented in sovereign autonomy.’ Differences and hybrid identities are not absolute horizons of meaning – and so they are not ends in themselves. ‘Inscriptions’ suggests that class (for example) is one among many elements of difference, to be brought together, without guarantees, in a politics that is, ‘a process of making connections between partial cultural milieux.’

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30 Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.172.
32 Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.175.
It is apparent, then, that Rich’s poem thematically coincides with many of Bhabha’s most familiar concerns. Alongside this reading of Rich, there is the perhaps more predictable reading of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1999), through which Bhabha suggests that, ‘narrative invests language with the “right” to explore and endure, to survive and savour a complex revision in the community of meaning and being.’ Through his reading of *Paradise* he makes a case for literature’s qualities as a *supplement* to law. More specifically, he is suggesting that literature is what gives the language of law access to the right to narrate, which is essentially a right of intervention in the telling of histories. The programmatic definition of that right is given as follows, and immediately broadens the scope of that narration, reminding us why it is appropriate that a poem as much as anything else should frame these theoretical reflections:

By the ‘right to narrate,’ I mean to suggest all those forms of creative behaviour that allow us to represent the lives we lead, question the conventions and customs that we inherit, dispute and propagate the ideas and ideals that come to us most naturally, and dare to entertain the most audacious hopes and fears for the future. [...] Suddenly in painting, dance, or cinema you rediscover your senses, and in that process you understand something profound about yourself, your historical moment, and what gives value to a life lived in a particular town, at a particular time, in particular social and political conditions.

So there is nothing that specific about modes of literary narration, in this context. The right to narrate is expressed anywhere that process or the temporal is re-emphasised: the right to narrate is a right to the hybridity and open-ness of storytelling. Narrative is, Bhabha insists, ‘a moving sign of civic life.’ If it is stifled, by those either against narration (who do not want the truth to be told) or those apparently in favour of its reassertion (wanting the unified truth, contradictions and negotiations excised), then the result is the totalising sociological explanation, or the authoritarian political culture: ‘When you fail to protect the right to narrate, you are in danger of filling the silence with sirens, megaphones, hectoring voices carried by loudspeakers from podiums of great height over people who shrink into indistinguishable masses.’

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37 Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.181.
Hybridity and Democracy

The situation Bhabha is describing may be familiar enough. It may be a situation, in fact, that puts in question the ‘hybridity paradigm.’ Writing before 9/11, Marjorie Perloff suggests that although there are many problems with his work, ‘[i]n its general outlines, Bhabha’s hybridity paradigm has enormous appeal’; however, more recently she argues that the post-9/11 world proves the poverty of postcolonial theory, and specifically of Bhabha’s work. Perloff understands Bhabha’s basic position to be that all cultures are hybrid – and so, cultures cannot be polarized. If that is the case, Perloff suggests, the apparently polarized world-views now evident undermine the postcolonial position. There are many instances of a similar perspective on present global concerns, working with the ubiquitous thesis extended by Samuel Huntington that this century will see a clash of civilizations. However, as I suggested earlier, for Bhabha hybridity is everyday banality. In addition, Bhabha’s work actually does focus on moments of clash, of polarization, and of stasis. It is unsurprising that he has offered thoughtful comments on this supposed clash of civilizations. His recent work questions a cultural racism that divides the world into discrete cultural spaces: again, Bhabha wants to reinsert a temporal dimension into debates.

A particularly clear example of this reinsertion is the essay ‘Democracy De-realized,’ which begins by outlining our apparent situation – although this ‘our’ implies the pre-existent divisions between self and other that the essay challenges, and so obviously has to be qualified. We are often offered ‘the stark choice of civilizational clash – between Faith and Unfaith, or Terror and Democracy.’ The responses to processual truth outlined in the previous section are two aspects of the same attitude, and therefore remind us that what Bhabha calls ‘the embattled and embalmed narrative of civilizational clash’ is really a narrative without movement or opposition. What Bhabha argues about cultural rights gets to the heart of the post-9/11 world picture, or more precisely to the heart of many controversial theories of that world picture, particularly the idea of inevitable conflict between civilizations. Importantly, the implications of his work are far more interesting and far-reaching than the facile assertion or acknowledgement of cultural hybridity.

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42 Bhabha, ‘Democracy’, p.27.
So, Bhabha insists that the best place to learn our lessons regarding democracy is not where democracy is most vociferously proclaimed, but rather where it has been most ambiguous or even damaging in its effects:

when faced with the crises of progress or the perils of democracy, our lessons of equality and justice are best learned from those marginalized, peripheralized peoples who have harvested the bitter fruits of liberalism in its project of colonization and slavery, rather than those imperial nations and sovereign states that claim to be the seed-beds of Democracy.\textsuperscript{43}

Things are never quite as new as they seem, and things are never simply new: ‘Unless we recognize what is old and weary about the world – those “long histories” of slavery, colonization, diaspora – we are in no position to represent what is emergent or “new” within our contemporary global moment.’\textsuperscript{44} The postcolonial perspective on democracy, the parallax view from which democracy will appear so different, is a matter of what Bhabha calls the de-realization of democracy. The realization of democracy would be a familiar goal: either democracy needs to be realized in as many countries as possible, or we need to work hard to realize democracy here and now, as previous efforts have been flawed. The term de-realization is not, however, a mere play on this expected usage. Bhabha uses the term in two related ways. First, after Brecht, it refers to, “a critical “distance” or alienation disclosed in the very naming of the formation of the democratic experience and its expressions of equality.”\textsuperscript{45} In other words, at the moment when democracy is declared, it betrays evidence of excluded others. Secondly, in the manner of Surrealism, it means, ‘placing an object, idea, image or gesture in a context not of its making, in order to defamiliarize it, to frustrate its naturalistic and normative “reference” and see what potential that idea or insight has for “translation.”’\textsuperscript{46} So, we also de-realize to disclose what democracy might be, instead of simply assuming we already know what it should be. If we assume that we already know what democracy is, and what it can be in future, then we will be unready for what is coming from the future, the genuine changes that will come.

Relatedly, Bhabha thinks that cosmopolitanism is always yet to come; it is not something that exists in the present, nor is it something that could exist fully in any future present. It is not an object about which we have theories; instead it is a project, like democracy: ‘specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an uncosmopolitan thing to do.’\textsuperscript{47} If we already

\textsuperscript{43} Bhabha, ‘Democracy’, p.28.
\textsuperscript{44} Bhabha, ‘Democracy’, p.30.
\textsuperscript{45} Bhabha, ‘Democracy’, p.29.
\textsuperscript{46} Bhabha, ‘Democracy’, p.29.
\textsuperscript{47} Bhabha et al., p.577.
know what cosmopolitanism is, in a traditional intellectual history beginning perhaps with Kant, then we limit ourselves to a specific cosmopolitanism. This version of cosmopolitanism denies the constituent mediation in every culture, assuming it can partake of different and discrete, ‘pure’ cultures. It is a Eurocentric cosmopolitanism, and is therefore inadequate to a world in which, ‘centers are everywhere and circumferences nowhere.’

Adequate to that world is what Bhabha calls a *vernacular* cosmopolitanism, or what we might call cosmopolitanism hybridised, which would begin by finding its cosmopolitan lessons in many cultural contexts, ‘outside the box of European intellectual history.’ Cosmopolitanism would be de-realized itself, and this de-realization would be the beginning of a project to develop models of global citizenship. What we think we know about citizenship needs to be relativized, if we are not to produce further total theories that exclude vast numbers.

**Global Citizenship**

If citizenship is the right to rights generally, the idea of global citizenship is clearly central to the population movements of globalisation. Again, as throughout Bhabha’s work, minority perspectives seem most useful in the formulation of such a citizenship. Some examples just are the best examples of a given phenomenon, and when it comes to the strange case of the global subject, the postcolonial provides examples of the ongoing experience of transition. ‘The territoriality of the global “citizen” is, concurrently, postnational, denational or transnational.’ This global citizen is difficult to describe. Bhabha’s description is less important for the words it chooses than the relationship it sets up with the ‘normal’ case of nationality: its form is as important as its content. Bhabha discusses this citizenship in terms drawn from contemporary legal theory, which has formulated an ‘effective nationality,’ a nationality adjacent to ‘formal nationality.’ This nationality has status in the context of international rights legislation, and although it seems to be in a relationship of dependency or even subservience with formal nationality, its adjacency is less a poor substitute and more a necessary supplement. The global citizen is necessarily disjointed, not quite at one with itself. Effective nationality is, in other words, contiguous, and its relationship with formal nationality is one of metonymy.

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48 Bhabha et al., p.588.
49 Bhabha et al., p.586.
This reference to metonymy allows us to understand Bhabha’s introduction of Antonio Gramsci at this point. Of course, Gramsci is most closely associated with the idea of hegemony, emphasizing the ways power is not only a matter of domination but also of consent. As is well known, according to Gramsci, in trying to create consent, hegemony encounters inevitable dissent: accordingly, cultural meaning is negotiated, and is not something that can be simply imposed by ruling classes.\textsuperscript{51} To answer the question of who exactly conducts these negotiations under globalisation, Bhabha evokes a ‘philosophy of the part,’ a philosophy given institutional expression in the idea of ‘the cultural front’: ‘A cultural front does not have a homogeneous and totalizing view of the world.’\textsuperscript{52} The cultural front transforms the meaning of hegemony, because it undermines the idea of pre-given political identities. The relationships of hegemony may be complex negotiations, but they are still complex negotiations between fairly stable classes. This stability is often assumed to have been undermined by the shift to postmodern social conditions. Nonetheless, political collectivities obviously retain their importance. It is just that there is a need to imagine collective subjects, and not simply reduce these subjects to effects of rational contracts between fully conscious individuals: in other words, a cultural front is an alliance that is narrated, and indeed is explicitly so.

Bhabha is specifically interested in how the hegemonic imagination is translated when coupled with Gramsci’s idea of the subaltern. Indeed, it is of course through this latter category that Gramsci’s influence is usually felt in postcolonial criticism, for example in the work of the Subaltern Studies group and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Here, Bhabha emphasizes the ways in which subalternity is connected to the philosophy of the part: ‘Subalternity represents a form of contestation or challenge to the status quo that does not homogenize or demonize the state in formulating an opposition to it.’\textsuperscript{53} Rather than resorting to simplistic polarities, the cultural front places itself in a relationship of negotiation with the status quo: accordingly, it does not simply reject the status quo. Instead, there is a demand for the recognition of process and partiality. The partializing presence, the metonymy that Bhabha apparently privileges over metaphor, is here refigured as subaltern contiguity, or a translation between political contexts that is always provisional and ongoing. This translatability is what allows so many different experiences to be called postcolonial: it is not to say that they are all ‘the same,’ but to recognise that translations and affiliations between contexts can be expedient in political transformation.


\textsuperscript{52} Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.31.

\textsuperscript{53} Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.32.
Grouping these examples together constructs a form of counter-hegemony: such a postcolonial cultural formation must be constructed with care, but its potential justifies that effort. This is because the postcolonial perspective has so many insights into the experiences that characterise the present. So, Bhabha suggests that the time of the contemporary, the feeling of time in the contemporary moment, is best imagined through the examples afforded by partial milieux, subjects and collectives who experienced those tired, old histories of slavery and colonialism. He argues that, ‘[t]he uneven and unequal playing field of the global terrain – “partial” and “incipient,” neither past nor present but “incipational” – is nonetheless encountered and experienced as living in, and through, a shared historical time of “transition.”’\textsuperscript{54} It is this feeling of partiality and transition that should, for Bhabha, be built into the idea of global citizenship: the subaltern negotiates from a position of partiality and hybridity, without the guarantees of rootedness. Only through emphasizing the interconnectedness and incompleteness of our identities can we construct a model of citizenship that will not revert to default assumptions about the permanence and pre-eminence of national identity.

### Conclusion

What I have traced through Bhabha’s more recent writing is the way in which the idea of hybridity has practical implications for a particular discourse of human rights. In other words, I have followed the way in which hybridity informs a kind of intervention, rather than constituting a description of something already present, out there waiting for study. Earlier I quoted Bhabha arguing that hybridity demands a particular model of critical practice, which we can now see as a particular form of critical reading. Some of the texts read may well appear incongruous in a discussion of rights discourses. Perhaps it is the form or the logic of these texts that makes them attractive to Bhabha. Indeed, in terms of rights his interest lies less in what is said than in the possibility of saying anything at all. This, he argues, is one distinction between individual and collective rights:

> Freedom of expression is an individual right; the right to narrate, if you will permit me poetic license, is an enunciative right rather than an expressive right – the dialogic, communal or group right to address and be addressed, to signify and be interpreted, to speak and be heard, to make a sign and to know that it will receive respectful attention.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.31.
\textsuperscript{55} Bhabha, ‘On Writing’, p.34.
In the end, then, the cultural right to narrate is a right to be read in a strong sense. The right to narrate is not being recognized by interpretations that follow the standard, customary rules, fitting whatever object is under consideration into the expected box, and excluding what it cannot understand from all categories. Hybridity requires us to read and legislate with greater attentiveness to that which moves in between.

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White Fatigue, or, Supplementary Notes on Hybridity

Sabine Broeck

Abstract

This article addresses a signifying field of hybridity ranging from individual and social negotiations of material instances of embodied hybridity to academic articulations of hybridity. A number of representations may function interchangeably here for my purposes: creolization, impure cultures, bastardization, mongrelisation, cultural mestizaje or métissage; there has been a shift in the metaphorical weight of those terms from pejorative degradation to idealization, even to an aggrandizement. The concept of hybridity could function as adept epistemology of/for cultures that have been embedded in social/historical constellations characterized by violent displacement and replacement of peoples, and are cast now in a hybridity owed to the Middle Passage and colonialism. Recently, however, it has circulated as a circumatlantic ubiquitous metaphor, lining up connotations which are strangely timeless, and disinvested in particular locations, or histories. Hybridity appears to have been finally cut loose from any referential grounds; it floats as a signifier to articulate the intellectual and psychic gains of globalisation, and for a re-vamped version of primitivist desire for Western people. I argue that the blank of whiteness within/and against this paradigm of hybridity needs to be inscribed to address its legacies of to an ongoing (post)colonial history: romancing the hybrid will not suffice.

It is the composite reality of the bastard that obsesses Glissant, not the longing for a remote paternity. (Dash)
Metropolitan hybridity is underwritten by the stable regime of western secular identity and the authenticity that goes with it, whereas post-colonial hybridity has no such guarantees. (Radhakrishnan)
Colonial desire: a furtive fascination with miscegenation and inter-racial transgression. (Dust jacket blurb)

Introduction

I want to begin with two anecdotes, one from the American context, the other – personal one – straight out of Frankfurt. Here is the first one, lifted from the journal Race Traitor, from their Spring 1994 issue:

According to press reports and our own correspondents, the white race is showing signs of fracture in the rural midwest. Several white female students at North Newton Junior-Senior High School near Morocco, Indiana, who call themselves the ‘Free to Be Me Group,’ recently started braiding their hair in dreadlocks and wearing baggy jeans and
combat boots, a style identified with Hip-Hop culture. Morocco is a small farming town seventy miles south of Chicago; of the 850 students at the school, two are black.¹

The journal editors go on to describe the incident and show how the group was subjected to the most violent and hateful harassment, how the school community suffered death threats, a bomb scare and a Ku Klux Klan rally; some of the girls in braids were directly physically attacked by Klanspeople. Some of the girls were suspended from school for violating the school’s dress codes, others have withdrawn, including one of the black kids. The incident reveals, in the editors’ conclusion, ‘the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine both white solidarity and (white) male authority.’²

My second anecdote does not contain the same level of violence but also spotlights those aspects of hybridity I am interested to discuss. Last summer when I picked up my son from his kindergarten, another kid followed us onto the street, calling us to stop because he wanted to see who was Youssou’s mother. After staring at us for a while he blurted out rather aggressively: ‘You are impossible! You don’t fit together!’ Registering our incomprehension, he started his chant across the street: ‘Black and white don’t go together’ and yelled at me: ‘you ought to have a white child!’

As might be extrapolated from the gist of those anecdotes I will be concerned with a signifying field that encompasses a range of pronouncements from cultural celebrations of hybridity to individual and social negotiations of material instances of embodied hybridity to academic articulations of hybridity.³ A number of representations may function interchangeably here for my purposes: creolization,⁴ impure cultures, bastardization, mongrelisation, cultural mestizaje or métissage – the parallel connotations of the series are significant: there has been a striking shift in the metaphorical weight of those terms from pejorative degradation to idealization, even to an aggrandizement similar to the re-evaluation of ‘black’ in the 1960s, or ‘queer’ after Stonewall. Robert J. C. Young has provided a useful genealogy for the conceptual development of those mixing terms in two of his books, tracing the deployment of hybridity and

² Ignatiev and Garvey, n.p.
³ The question if and to what extent there is, or why there does not generally exist a political field of hybridity deserves attention on its own but cannot be dealt with within the frame of this article. See R. Radhakrishnan, ‘Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity’, Callaloo, 16 (1993), 750-71.
creolisation as theoretical signifiers in cultural theory to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of the interplay of ‘mute’ and ‘intentional’ hybridization in language systems.\(^5\) Young of course credits Homi K. Bhabha’s early essay of 1985 ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’ which heavily, though not explicitly leans on Bakhtin’s work with paving the way for the widespread deployment of hybridity as a concept in the Western academic world.\(^6\) Young does mention Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of ‘creolization’ in passing,\(^7\) but the crucial impact of Caribbean influences, the earlier articulations of Antillanité, in Edouard Glissant’s phrase, does not receive due attention.\(^8\)

‘Reality of the Bastard’

One of the first intellectuals to circulate the Bakhtinian concepts adapted to the particular Caribbean situation was Edouard Glissant in 1973.\(^9\) Glissant’s ‘poétique de la relation’ appears, instantly transformed by the transferral into the American (language) context, as ‘Cross-Cultural poetics.’ J. Michael Dash, the editor of the American collection of Glissant’s essays, *Caribbean Discourse*, describes Glissant’s project as a preoccupation with an ‘exuberance, of ecstasy, that is an imaginative departure from the shipwrecked, petrified condition of the colonized mind’ and sees Glissant’s contribution as an attempt to ‘conceive of a new solidarity or métissage (creolization).’ Glissant himself seems to be indeed focussed, in Dash’s phrasing, on the ‘composite reality of the bastard (instead of) a remote paternity.’\(^10\) In his essays, however, he seems a lot more concerned with the painful memory and long-term consequences of the cultural contact


\(^6\) Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817’, *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 144-65.

\(^7\) Young, *Colonial*, p.21.

\(^8\) See Ostendorf.

\(^9\) In lectures at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1973) and at the First International Symposium on Ethnopoetics of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (1975).

Caribbean peoples have been submitted to than with exuberant abandon. He repeatedly refers his readers to the price that was exacted by the historical processes of creolization, and to the ambivalences carried by a theoretical concept of cultural mixing rooted in such historical violence. While he acknowledges it as an epistemological strength, or advance, that ‘[c]omposite peoples, those who could not deny or mask their hybrid composition, nor sublimate it in the notion of mythical pedigree, do not “need” the notion of Genesis, because they do not need the myth of pure lineage’ and maintains that ‘the idea of creolization demonstrates that henceforth it is no longer valid to glorify “unique” origins that the race safeguards and prolongs,’ he also sees a necessity to ‘deconstruct [...] the “category” of creolized that is considered halfway between two “pure” extremes’ thus indicating his awareness of the ideological racist baggage of the very term. Even at his time of writing, the term ‘cross-cultural contact’ has ‘also become an argument for assimilationist propaganda’ on the part of the French powers that be.11

Hybridity as a concept may thus be traced to an eager interest on the part of cultural anthropology and later, postcolonial studies to ‘read’ the Caribbean as one of postmodernity’s chronotopes of instructive value. As Bill Schwarz suggests in ‘Memories of Empire’ for the British context:

> The Caribbean possesses a significant hold on these discussions. Not only does the passage from the West Indies to the cold realities of actually existing England fashions it own perceptions, but the deeper history of the Caribbean as a peculiar distillation of America, Europe and Africa resonates with contemporaneity. [...] [I]t is a history full of complexity, not easily conforming to the lived expectations of roots. Indeed, the contending, dissonant historical times which have gone into the making of Caribbean identities in the moment of modernity compel us to think in terms of ‘heteroglossia’ and hybridity – of the collision of distinct histories producing new forms.12

That is to say, the Bakhtinian notions could at this point function as adept epistemology of/for cultures that have been embedded in social/historical constellations characterized by violent displacement and replacement of peoples, and are cast now in a hybridity owed to the Middle Passage, as Glissant insists,13 creatively trying to come to terms with a particularly aggressive effect of modernity. The concept seems to me to have had particular resonance and usefulness in that respect; recently, however, it has circulated but as a ‘circumatlantick,’ to borrow Berndt Ostendorf’s vocabulary, ubiquitous metaphor. Ostendorf, who offers a fully developed

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13 Glissant, pp.94-5.
recontextualization of the term ‘creolité,’ including an fascinating
semiological description, has cautioned the interested reader to beware of the
inherent and inevitable oscillation of terms like ‘creole.’ Shored up by the
academic popularity of theorists like Bhabha, Ulf Hannerz, Stuart Hall, Paul
Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sara Suleri, Ann
DuCille, Anne McClintock, Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Rosi
Braidotti – to call on just a few leading proponents – the concept entered the
Western academic theory business. To quote Ostendorf:

Two trends increased the attractiveness: First, globalization and the economic range of
and interest in world systems has deparochialized the historiography of the New World.
Secondly the rise, after the national emancipation of African and Caribbean countries,
of a sense of local perspective and of local merit has brought into focus the many local,
creolized cultures of the Atlantic system. [...] Ulf Hannerz suggests that one aspect of
globalization may be creolization which has triggered a new global interest in flux,
culture contact and diversity. Hence there is a new need of finding terms that would
conceptualize such a multicultural diversification. Creole as a concept was found useful
in ‘domesticating’ diversity, in making ‘pluralism’ lose its otherness and go native.14

Accordingly, hybridity’s currency in all sorts of discourses ranging from
arguments about the postcolonial condition to remapping American culture to
Western philosophy to postcolonial musicology has been disseminated to the
point of saturating even rather casual academic communication. How
globalisation produces hybridity as a sine qua non of our contemporaneity
but also in turn feeds on it, has been pervasively debated in postcolonial
studies, whereas the ideological freight of hybridity as epistemological
metaphor has not been as widely acknowledged.

This seems to be of particular urgency, however, as Young has argued in
Colonial Desire. For him the ‘steamy mixture’ of nineteenth-century racial
theories of hybridization encoded the sexual traffic in the colonies as both
‘mirror [...] and consequence’ of a colonial economy of trading posts and
slave ships, of an ‘an exchange of bodies as of goods, or rather of bodies as
goods.’15 He concludes that:

It was therefore wholly appropriate that sexual exchange, and its miscegenated product,
which captures the violent, antagonistic power relations of sexual and cultural diffusion,
should become the dominant paradigm through which the passionate economic and
political trafficking of colonialism was conceived. Perhaps this begins to explain why
our own forms of racism remain so intimately bound up with sexuality and desire. The
fantasy of postcolonial cultural theory, however, is that those in the Western academy at

14 Ostendorf, p.25.
15 Young, Colonial, p.181.
least have managed to free themselves from this hybrid commerce of colonialism, as from every other aspect of the colonial legacy.16

As Young so articulately argues, hybridity is a concept whose genealogy we cannot afford to forget; its name cannot be metaphorically transferred into other cultural realms unproblematically. Even if, as Young also concedes, the term might be used in all good (and progressive) faith, the referential grounds of the metaphor remain laid out in (enforced) breeding, or mis-breeding, precisely in miscegenation and, more often than not, in a dispossession of generations. Young’s analysis shows that in the early nineteenth-century formulations of cultural contact, the historical links between language and sex were fundamental. Both produced what were regarded as ‘hybrid’ forms (creole, pidgin and miscegenated children) which were seen to embody threatening forms of perversion and degeneration and became the basis for endless metaphoric extension in the racial discourse of social commentary.17

The potential meaning of degeneracy carried involuntarily by the term hybridity is being dealt with rather flippantly by its contemporary conflation with carnival and contestation. Glissant’s argument, by contrast, situated as it is within the colonial power hierarchy, has to work through this inherited meaning that tries to silence his creolised voice: ‘According to traditional (French) textbooks, Creole is a patois that is incapable of abstract thought and therefore unable to convey knowledge.’18 This freighted legacy of alleged infertility (in literal and metaphorical terms) is forced underground, becomes the always already suppressed element as soon as terms like hybridity, or créolité blissfully appear in white western-based theory that refuses to acknowledge a historical perspective – a mistake that Young criticizes Bhabha for even in his early White Mythologies. Enunciated from a location of (white) western intellectuality, the rhetorical figure of hybridity, even though it contains traces of its original referent of hybridity in the material shape of bastardized life, does not show any prominent interest to address that condition of hybridity in the flesh, or in historical location.

I want to read, for its exemplary character, the introduction to a special issue of Paragraph (1995) on Practices of Hybridity. The editor Mireille Rosello introduces a volume of essays describing, and also constituting those hybrid, or hybridizing practices, ranging from the black voice in mainstream news to the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 in Paris to the ‘critic as tourist.’ Language (or better, the play of signification) is once again being brought

16 Young, Colonial, p.182.
17 Young, Colonial, p.5.
18 Glissant, p.182.
back to desire (detour Bakhtin’s and Bhabha’s rather more abstract and brainy occupations), and vice versa, the jouissance of ‘disrespectful dubbing’ connected to the fascination of oxymoronic sexy businessmen. One could say history has caught up with Rosello’s phrasing, bringing in through the semantic cracks the old value of hybridity as lure and threat of illegitimacy:

Even if it still belongs to the domain of the yet unimagined, the de-listing imperative is one of the possible practices of hybridity, and the following articles are all fascinated by events, narratives or cultural phenomena that contribute to the dispersing of prefabricated lists [which construct normative identities]. When journalists disrespectfully dub professional businessmen ‘hiphop bankers,’ the apparently oxymoronic quality of the phrase reveals that an implicit list of legitimate attributes is being tampered with by the practices adopted by the bankers in question [...]. And as Paulette Caldwell’s analysis of their story shows, the new hybrid relationships created between hiphop culture and capitalism, between generations and genders, between the media and their objects of scrutiny, are worth elucidating.19

On the one hand, Rosello’s argument attests to an advance in Western mobility, colourfulness and an ironical tolerance of paradoxes. The genealogy of hybridity, however, inevitably haunts the Paragraph issue: beyond wishful celebratory fantasies hybridity’s legacy of colonialism will as necessarily be shored up as will its contemporary charge of postcolonial imperial relations. Thus, Glissant’s poetics of relation and Gilroy’s transatlantic diasporas do make an oblique appearance, quoted to support ‘the value of hybrid dialogues between hybrid and creolized individuals.’ In this reference to precursor theories, the ‘underside’ of hybridity will be allowed: ‘Hybridity is not the present that displaces a more violent and unacceptable past, it is a form of attention to the return of the colonial repressed under the guise of new and improved scientific categories, groups, classes and lists.’20

Swallowing up this referential allusion, however, Rosello’s line-up of the commandeering, but interchangeable connotations of hybridity sound strangely timeless, and disinvested in particular locations: disidentification, de-listing, inventing identities, the but hitherto suppressed creolization of ‘our own’ culture, the ‘hybrid parts in each of us,’ ‘hybridity as a reinvention of forms of belonging,’ ‘the idea of practising hybridity as an attempt at renouncing the “add-on” strategy’ of multiculturalism. In the following phrases, hybridity appears to have been finally cut loose from any referential grounds and indeed floats as a signifier for an effort to articulate the intellectual and psychic gains for ‘ourselves’ of sublating subtle distinctions between ‘repressed’ and ‘continuous,’ between ‘other cultures’ (whatever

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20 Rosello, p.9.
that may signify in detail) in some alleged practical sense and the effects of ‘theory.’ The levelling of discriminations between categories of such necessary particularities as ‘tragedy,’ ‘nostalgia,’ ‘pleasure’ or ‘empowerment’ makes way for the mobilizing spectacle of various allegedly factual, if unconscious instances of hybridity we are surrounded by:

The conceptualization of repressed creolity and continuing creolization within ourselves, whether it is taught to us by our everyday encounter with other cultures or by the everyday encounter with theory, may be the first stage of hybrid thinking, the second stage being the discovery of the different levels of tragedy, conflicts but also enjoyment, pleasure, nostalgia and empowerment involved in each specific sites of (more or less amnesiac) creolisation.21

But alas, in the ‘real’ world, however postmodern, echoes of Bakhtin’s novelistic carnivalesque momentum may be sounded, but factual fulfilment is hard to come by: ‘Perhaps even more rarely does the hybrid part of each of us, whether amnesiac or active, have a chance to engage in a hybrid dialogue with other hybrids.’22

What tends to get lost in those enthusiastic formulations of hybridity as the postmodern condition are delicate nuances within hybridity: the question whether hybridity is chosen or imposed, accepted or rejected is decisive but often remains hidden under a certain aesthetization of the phenomenon. It should be stressed, however, that the difference between a hybridity shaped by an ambiguous relationship between creative opportunities and mourning that Glissant proposed and a hybridity of ecstatic acquisition of multiplicity cannot be foregone – and the social positions from where one may or may not feel interpellated into either one possibility may not to be taken up voluntaristically. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in Unthinking Eurocentrism:

As a descriptive catch-all term, ‘hybridity’ fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity: colonial imposition, obligatory assimilation, political cooptation, cultural mimicry and so forth. Elites have always made top-down raids on subaltern cultures, while the dominated have always ‘signified’ and parodied as well as simulated elite practice. Hybridity, in other words, is power-laden and asymmetrical.23

A lot of the recent hype with hybridity disregards the necessary relation of different articulations of hybridity to different subject positions on the race, class, and gender spectrums. All individuals or social groups partaking in

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21 Rosello, p.5.
22 Rosello, p. 6.
‘practices of hybridity’ – even if I go along with the term for the moment – do not, beyond location in time and space, share the same subject position via their very being supposedly hybridized. Western white intellectuals (the ‘we’ the Paragraph introduction keeps addressing rather exclusively) have a rather particular position from which to speak – owing not only to colonial history, as Young reminds us, but also to the West’s contemporary quite parasitical relation to most of the world’s population. The consequences of a global shifting around of populations – even if it means the ‘empire coming home to roost’ and has produced the colourful faces and tunes of Western metropolises – do not qualify as spectacles of hybridity, as in Rosello’s ‘tragedy’ lined up with the bankers’ postmodern and urbane consumerist taste flexibility.

I suggest that the articulation of modernity’s and postmodernity’s hybridity should not fix white intellectuals in a desire to partake in its hip ‘presence to the times,’ as Allison puts it,24 but instead prompt a tracing and notation of that mobile white energy, its particular investments in and responsibility for hybridity, historically, and presently. Accordingly – if the hybrid, or the condition of hybridity, should not remain a freshly convenient term for the white West’s seductive other – a theorization of hybridity cannot forego a theorization of whiteness. Stuart Hall has asserted with a certain glee that a hybrid like himself has arrived at embodying the centre position and seems to have relegated – in intellectual attention at least – the previous white centre to a melancholic self-identification as marginalized.25

**White on White**

Hall’s observation points to – but does not fully take on – this problems. Can white men jump?26 Can white women enjoy their bodies? Pointing out white feminist critical trajectories’ desire for a ‘rearticulation of the body and its passions’ Elizabeth Abel’s reading of inter-racial communication between black and white women critics27 bespeaks a white disinvestment to share in

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26 The reference is of course to the 1980s film *White Men Can’t Jump* (dir. Ron Shelton).
27 See Elizabeth Abel, ‘Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation’, *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1993), 470-98. This – so the gist of Abel’s argument – fostered a post-poststructuralist turn to black and minority women’s writing where there is a fuller, and more vibrant body.
the ‘hideous personal deficiencies’ of a ‘race without skin’, as the ‘quintessence of lack’ as Alice Walker, among others, has phrased it dauntingly. The cultural/social phenomena encoded in these questions bespeak a specific *fin de siècle* fatigue in the western subject with the constraints (real or imagined) of being white and a postmodern remake of modernism’s preoccupation with so-called primitivism. My contention is that ‘we’ (white feminist or progressives of diverse orientations) should begin to unflinchingly address this perception of ‘lack’ and take ‘our’ desire to transcend it seriously enough to examine whiteness as a white (wo)man’s burden. Without resorting to fast and easy fixes on the question, or to guilt-tripping sentimentality, ‘we’ need to work through the question of white embodiment. Which psychosexual and cultural impossibilities has the history of whiteness in the West created to prevent visceral and spiritual ‘fullness’? What might be the possible kernel of truth in the old and new assumptions of ‘white coldness,’ and how is white privilege tied into it, and do we really want to know? This problematic needs to be faced white on white, I think, and not displaced by or evaded with identificatory turns to hybridity. This return to, and not a more or less lazy displacement of ‘colonial desire’ seems urgent to me. In a way, one could argue that the fascination with hybridity has replaced, in some – mostly academic – circles, the modernist shiver a Josephine Baker could send down white audience’s spines, but with a vengeance. This time ‘we’ (as in Rosello’s argument) may partake in the oscillating and invigorating otherness without being called on our biographical and sociographical legacies of racism.

If ‘hybridity’ signifies a crisis of homogeneity, how do white people relate their whiteness to that crisis? The reverse side of the lure is the sense of being threatened, generating a range of responses from denial to fascist aggression against cultural mixing, sexual license, and general impure degeneration, to obsessive claims to an unsoiled whiteness; hence insults like the one against the three year old not being the same as his mother. To ‘fit one’s mother’ becomes essential to Germans whose laws of guaranteeing Germanhood only to children of German birth has until the recent influx of ‘hybridising’ elements like marriageable African men, guaranteed an almost total and automatic equation of Germanness and whiteness. Thus, beyond the realm of intellectual liberal delight in hybridization white Germans’ cultural and political reactions to it are by no means predictable.

If contexts like this are not established, the hybridity discourse may serve to displace, and actually neutralize theoretical and activist labour against racialisation and racism. This is as pertinent to the American debate about multiculturalism and the newly discovered old ‘hybridity’ of USAmerican culture as it is to any considerations of a happily hybridized European
community. The recent zoom on hybridity in American Studies figures as a poignant example. Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s 1990s mapping essay\(^{28}\) in celebration of American culture as a hybrid, synergetic, intimate, and jazzed up dialectic of black and white not only obscures more radical, not so sexy 1970s investigations of the power of ‘blanchitude,’ in Sylvia Wynter’s words, to ‘[inscribe] the globe, coding value and non-value, binding the structures of production under the hegemony of its imaginary social significations.’\(^{29}\) It also delights in a revived jeremiadism of hybridity as a metasignifier for an American vision of mixed national energy without brakes, a project which nonchalantly misses to address an actual resurge of racism, class struggle from above and the formation of the nationalistic Right.

It is of course an overdue insight that cultural identities and subject positions have never been inherently pure – except: For some people drawn into the transformations of globalization they are a lot more impure than for Western white people in positions of relative affluence, relative social peace and relative cultural hegemony. Bhabha’s dream of ‘the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy’\(^{30}\) could only be envisioned if the power relations at work in the production of hybridity are unveiled. Who mixes what, with whom, with what result, for what reasons, motives, and interests at what historical moment, in what contexts? These are the questions that need to be constantly reraised to avoid a history-less fetishization of the metaphor. The celebration of hybridity always threatens to get stuck in an intellectual version of bastard chique, as one of the compensations white western intellectuals have, after the nomad, the homeless, the exiled, the stranger, the tourist, the bricoleur, and the margin dweller, paraded as New World paradigms to ‘bemoan the crisis, the fragmentation and loss of the Western subject or to re-vitalize its standing,’ in Heike Paul’s words.\(^{31}\)

R. Radhakrishnan’s reminder of the tacit difference behind metropolitan and postcolonial versions of hybridity supports that point succinctly. He sharply criticizes ‘avant-garde theories’ rejoicing in the opportunities hybridity offers to ‘decenter identity regimes,’ pretending to a ‘subject-less hybridity’ which has to deny its own embeddedness in the structures and discourses of the ‘dominant West [...] comfortably ensconced in the heartland


\(^{29}\) Sylvia Wynter, ‘Sambos and Minstrels’, Social Text, 1 (1979), 149-56.

\(^{30}\) Homi K. Bhabha, Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), p.4.

\(^{31}\) Heike Paul, Mapping Migration: Women’s Writing and the American Immigrant Experience from the 1950s to the 1990s (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1999), p.6.
of both national and transnational citizenship. Accordingly, his satirical parade of ‘European hybridity, French hybridity, American hybridity’ points to the crucial lack in those figuralities: the blank of whiteness within a paradigm like hybridity needs to be inscripted; romancing the hybrid will not suffice.

To acknowledge whiteness entails, most of all, a political gesture, as different from, for example, individual cultural preferences. For white music audiences, for example, to prefer hip hop, jazz or Youssou N’Dour over and against their ‘proper’ musical heritage does not effect a change in/of a white subject position beyond decisions of personal taste. Granted an erosive, seductive power of crossover styles to perform nagging doubt on the transparency of social, cultural, and national identities, there is no self-hybridization by way of surrounding oneself with commodities, intellectual or otherwise. Nor by way of fantasizing oneself hybrid. An academically installed intellectual, born and raised in England, having lived in Istanbul (or even Zaire, for that matter) for some terms, and then going on to teach in Berlin will not thereby forsake her white western subject position. She may be more cosmopolitan-minded and aware of the world outside the hermetically sealed white environment of, say, a British university some decades ago, but that does not change her status in a global social and political economy, it does not alter her positions on the global scales of production, distribution and consumption of wealth and knowledge. Neither does it make that person in any way as equally hybridized by a life-in-difference, by sometimes antagonistic cultural and social interpellations as an impoverished Pakistani family, belonging to the class of workers in ‘precarious economies’ as Pierre Bourdieu has called it appropriately, whose parents, children and grandchildren by the end of the 1990s are scattered in places like Switzerland, Italy, England, the USA and/or an African country, holding on to their respective positions mostly by bare thread. Neither to political asylum seekers, to the refugees trying to survive in camps all over the African continent, nor to African legal or illegal immigrants without any formal education to sell on the European job market. Neither to Black women working for Indian households in Alabama, to Eritrean de-classed immigrants dishwashing all over Europe, nor to Croats delivering themselves to illegal border trade with human beings, seeking to make a more peaceful life in Canada. Though there might be a certain parallel in class positions, not even a close similarity to the hybridized existence of an African academic at an American university, or a top notch

32 Radhakrishnan, p.753.
female scientist from India working for a Paris-based international company may be taken for granted.

My literal ‘figuring’ here of different instances of hybridization versus a status of un-interrogated white privilege is, of course, strategical, as is its rhetorics of hybridity in the flesh calculated to weigh the free-for-all abundance of ‘hybridizing practices’ with a reference to material conditions that Rosello’s ‘we’ precisely do not share. I do not want to imply – in rather mechanistic fashion – that a white subject position per se does not allow for the agency to self-deconstruct. Indeed, as my first anecdote proves, the lines between a playful engagement with those ‘hybridizing practices’ the Paragraph introduction revels in and an effective surrender of privilege might be hard to draw, all the more so since individual white subjects may not be left alone with their innocent desires. As my anecdotes also demonstrate white privilege is not safely untouchable by the social body of Western societies, and the question who polices the boundaries of how whiteness may appear, exactly how much ‘impurity’ Western societies are willing to take, is far from being settled. Organized efforts at re-purification that may be witnessed over the last ten years in all European and North-American societies by militant defenders of white and Western homogeneity cannot in the long run be countered by a wilful up-staging of transgression – even though the effects of the performative bliss may be maddening enough for some. It will become crucial to patiently deconstruct the legacy of ‘our’ white national and individual histories and to name ‘our’ implications in the social construction of white dominance in order to refuse being interpellated into a socially forceful nostalgia for (white) normalcy.

Conclusion

To own one’s whiteness as a decisive composite of a Western positionality means to acknowledge privilege, to become conscious of entitlement: conscious of a certain position in the – national and global – traffic of empowerment (or destruction) within the hierarchies of structural domination. As Richard Dyer in his seminal 1988 Screen article ‘White’ has observed, whiteness is a social construction flaunting innocence of its particularity and of its own power; figuring paradoxically as ‘emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death’ while at the same time reading its own existence as ‘coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity.’ Dyer’s critique focuses on the dialectic by which white domination is reproduced by the way that white people colonize the definition of normal: ‘If the invisibility of whiteness colonizes the definitions
of other norms – class, gender, heterosexuality, nationality, and so on – it also masks whiteness as itself a category. This category then, a characteristic cultural/historical construction, is, in turn, achieved through white domination. To examine how specific white subject positions partake in, or could possibly subvert that white domination; to bracket, as it were, their own whiteness and to make visible the complicities and suppressions of white subject positions in culturally valent narratives, appears as a challenging, and promising task.

Whiteness studies have at this point become a ‘humanities subfield’ as David Stowe has called it. While to me there seems to be a treacherous solipsism involved in white scholars ‘doing’ whiteness, especially if decades of Black Studies work on racialisation and racism go unregarded, the project is commendable to the same extent that men have gained insight from confronting their own genderedness and the politics of gender. As with gender, racial belonging and – in the case of whiteness – the social parasitism involved in any uninterrogated acceptance of its naturalness cannot voluntaristically be transcended, however productive (and seductive) the desire for defection into hybrid practices might appear to white intellectuals tired of the demanding prerogatives of Western culture.

Instead of relying on often dubious processes of hybridization, I would like to side with Mary Louise Pratt’s metaphor of the ‘contact zone,’ with a strong emphasis on the ‘arts’ required to move in it.36 There might be a place at that metaphorical table where experiences of fragmentation may be exchanged, practices of cultural fusion might be enjoyed in difference and common lessons of living down postmodernity might be had, like the ones Toni Morrison’s observations on the indebtedness of postmodern societies to a history of slavery, colonial dispossession and human division might teach us:

In terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the 19th century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and

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the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. [...] These strategies of survival made
the truly modern person. They’re a response to predatory western phenomena.  

I suggest, though, to tamper transgressive exuberance with some white
humility: the historical baggage we come with will take up a lot of space at
that table which, it seems to me, we ought to be delicately asking for, instead
of assuming it in the guise of ‘our’ hybridity.

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Abstract

This article examines the notion of ‘mimicry’ as theorised by Homi K. Bhabha, deconstructing the concept as untenable as it equalizes the mimicry of the coloniser and the colonised. It will also distinguish between two types of mimicry: the linguistic and cultural performative and the ideological performative. Analysing these performatives with regard to the literary output of V. S. Naipaul (The Mimic Men) and Salman Rushdie (The Satanic Verses) in contrast to that of Bapsi Sidhwa (Sock ’Em with Honey) and Anita Desai (Fasting, Feasting), the article ends with a call to construct a theoretical space for the biological hybrid who is also a cultural hybrid.

Introduction

Homi K. Bhabha defines mimicry as ‘one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge.’\(^1\) One of the many cross-cultural impersonators well known for the act of mimicry is the nineteenth-century international adventurer Richard Burton.\(^2\) In Indian Traffic, Parama Roy examines the role of Richard Burton who delighted in passing himself off as a native in India and other territories colonized by the British.\(^3\) His fluency in several languages and easy ability to consort with natives led him to adopt indigenous dress. Burton’s role within the British Empire (like that of many

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\(^1\) Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), p.85.

\(^2\) There were others, such as David Ochterlony, known to Indian historians as Nasir-ud-Daula, a colonial Englishman who renounced Christianity and converted to Islam, adopting its manners, customs and dress; he had a harem of thirteen wives. William Dalrymple points out that although the historians of the British Raj suppressed the records, many such as George Thomas the ‘Rajah from Tipperary’ who made of Hyderabad his own little kingdom, Joshua Blackwell, Williams Hawkins, and the French convert Farrashish Khan adopted Islamic religion and customs in India in the eighteenth century. Moreover, English merchants trading to the Middle East had been converting to Islam for centuries. Already, during the reign of Elizabeth there were considerably more Englishmen living in North Africa than in all the nascent North American colonies: five thousand English converts were resident in Algiers alone’ (Dalrymple, ‘When Albion’s Sons Went Native’, Biblio: A Review of Books, 6.7-8 [Mar./Apr. 2000], on-line). See also Dalrymple’s White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India (New York: Harper Collins, 2000). In autumn 2005 the BBC dramatized the tales of John Lewis Burkhardt who dressed as an Arab in Egypt (BBC ONE).

other converted Englishmen in colonial India and Egypt, see note 1) was a
subversive one: he regularly reported to the powers about insurgent activities
and incipient rebellions. Edward W. Said’s definition of the orientalist as a
western person who establishes and practises an authority in the texts of
colonized peoples applies to Burton’s writings as it does to the Egypt-based
Burkhardt (see note 1). As Roy points out, the narrator or speaker of Burton’s
extensive travelogues, letters, and journals, is always posited as the authority
on the native subject, having ‘penetrated and participated in every exotic and
forbidden mystery.’ Bhabha’s quotation of Jacques Lacan is apposite in this
context: ‘The effect of mimicry is camouflage [...]. It is not a question of
harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of
becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in
human warfare.’

The use of the concept of mimicry in theory is attributed to various
sources, and in postcolonial theory, most prominently to Bhabha. Yet it is
literature which gives rise to the definition of Bhabha’s theoretical concept.
In this case it is V. S. Naipaul’s 1967 novel _The Mimic Men_ and subsequently
the notion of mimicry as developed in the character of Saladin Chamcha of
Salman Rushdie’s _The Satanic Verses_ (1988), where ‘chamcha’ means toady,
and Saladin appears as a toady to Empire and the notion of the hegemonic
Imperial subject. However, as Bhabha points out, mimic men abound in
Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster, and George Orwell’s novels. Bhabha
theorises that mimicking the coloniser is a threat and a menace to the colonial
structure as the copying of the attitudes, behaviour, manners, and values of
the colonising culture contains a mockery as well as a certain menace in the
resemblance, thus marking the concept as _ambivalent_. Here, the anglicization
of a colonial subject makes the subject familiar and yet, for Bhabha,
emphasises the _difference_ from the English subject which is a process that
mocks the authority of the latter. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, then, is riven
with the notion of ‘ambivalence’ which suggests the attraction-repulsion to
colonial discourse theorised by Robert J. C. Young in his _Colonial Desire_
who takes seriously (for the most part), along with other theorists and critics
of his generation in the west, Bhabha’s theoretical elucidation of the
ambivalent ‘mimic man.’

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5 Qtd. in Bhabha, p.85.
6 See Bhabha, pp.85-92.
Response to Homi Bhabha’s Theory of ‘Mimicry’

Bhabha’s theory of mimicry rests on the false assumption that the act of an Englishman such as Burton masquerading as an Indian is equivalent to an Indian mimicking English values and attitudes. Burton’s presence among the natives, always precariously on the brink of discovery, is threatening to the colonized subject in his role as a spy. Burton’s impersonation gives him a thrill and a pleasure as his role as consummate actor is mingled with the knowledge of his own power. Other impersonators such as Ochterlony are not mocking but were in reverence and awe of the different culture and customs they had adopted whilst acting as double agents of Empire (see note 1). Bhabha’s reversal projected as equivalent on both sides is simplistic and does not take into account the role of power wielded by the culture of the colonizer. In his brief but insightful disavowal of Bhabha’s theorizing, Young points out that ‘such an analysis cannot be equally applicable to colonized as to colonizer.’

Whilst Burton’s manipulation of identity is substrated by the desire of colonial authority to insinuate itself into eastern life in order to render it accountable, and Ochterlony’s is an act of valorizing a different cultural ideology as equal to his own, the previously colonized subject – who is the locus of Bhabha’s theory of mimicry – mimics because he or she has internalized the notion that their cultural values are inferior to that of the colonials. As Bourdieu might put it, the doxic experience of the colonized subject has been altered because imposed upon by the prevailing colonial ideology, making the doxic field of the coloniser natural, valid, and indisputable. Thus the subject-positions of the coloniser and the colonized are radically different, employed for very different reasons, and on the part of the colonized subject, quite unconsciously as she internalizes and repeats implicitly the values she regards as superior. This re-inscription of colonial ideology is evident in Naipaul’s documentaries and travelogues on ‘third-world’ countries, and the critic Fawzia Mustafa has suggested that the popularity of Naipaul’s work in Europe and America is due to the sense of

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9 Young, White, p.145.
10 Roy, pp.30-1.
11 Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). Bourdieu explains doxa as the experience of the misrecognition (and therefore, recognition) of the norms, values, ideologies and social practices of one’s own group as ‘natural,’ indisputable and taken for granted (pp.164 ff). Colonial ideology has reified the ideas of English superiority which are then infused through discourse. For an analysis of the patriarchal, colonial and capitalist impulses which substrate Western culture see Dimple Godiwala, Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), pp.3-36.
‘self-definition’ it offers closet colonialists.\textsuperscript{12} By definition and by historical circumstance, a postcolonial writer like Naipaul must take into account the ideology or technology of thought implicit in the themes of colonialism and imperialism, and in the process, attempt to destabilise the hegemonic economic and cultural relations implied by them since the materials of the craftsmanship of the postcolonial intellectual come directly out of his or her relation to colonial history in terms of literary and cultural production.

Bhabha further defines mimicry as ‘a mode of colonial discourse,’ the ‘authority’ of which is ‘stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as \textit{the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal}.’\textsuperscript{13} Mimicry’s double strategy, says Bhabha, is one of appropriation, and also one which is ‘a difference or recalcitrance,’ thus posing as a threat to ‘“normalized knowledges” and disciplinary powers.’\textsuperscript{14} As Bhabha puts it, ‘[t]he effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing.’\textsuperscript{15} This is an interesting observation: the English colonial Burton would not have been able to pass as a native if he had displayed difference; if there were cracks in Burton’s mimicry, these would have led to discovery. Of course, Burton’s mimicry poses a powerful double (colonial) ‘resistance’ to imminent native insurgence, by guarding against it. A colonized subject mimicking the attitudes and ideologies of colonial discourse would also attempt to be as like the other as possible, for if he or she did not, theirs would not be an act of ‘mimicry’ or even one of Lacanian ‘camouflage’ both of which imply the consummate performative, a becoming mottled against a mottled background in the performance of a mastery of camouflage, displayed by Burton. As Young points out, Bhabha’s concept of mimicry is analogous to ‘the colonial unconscious’ spoken of by Fredric Jameson apropos Carl Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore even as it is a colonial construction of power by miming that very power, Bhabha says that it can destabilize that power only by the colonizer’s awareness that the mimic man is ‘not quite white.’

As has been observed on several occasions, the mimicry displayed in Naipaul’s writings simply repeats the hegemonic structures of colonial discourse which served to sustain the hierarchy of the west over the rest, and is a ‘postcolonial’ addition to that corpus of western knowledge that Said famously said was distinguished by the tendency to orientalize.\textsuperscript{17} That these

\textsuperscript{12} Fawzia Mustafa, \textit{V. S. Naipaul} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{13} Bhabha, p.86; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{14} Bhabha, p.86.
\textsuperscript{15} Bhabha, p.86; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{16} Young, \textit{White}, p.148.
\textsuperscript{17} See, e.g., Kwame Anthony Appiah’s coinage of the now notorious term ‘The Naipaul Fallacy’ in ‘Strictures on Structures: On Structuralism and African Fiction’, in \textit{Black Literature and
are, after the dismantling of colonialism proper, produced by those who are the products of the legacy of the hierarchies of knowledge imposed by colonialism such as Naipaul, a Caribbean-born writer of Indian origin, only serves to re-emphasise and reinscribe the hierarchies of western power, rather than pose a threat to ‘normalized knowledges’ as Bhabha contends. Ralph Singh, whose narrative in *The Mimic Men* begins and ends in London, is like Naipaul, a Caribbean-born Indian. From his vantage point in England, showing that the narrative is situated within colonial discourse, Singh describes the Caribbean islanders in a process which is simultaneously one of identification (‘we’) and disavowal:

We lack order. Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power. We mistake words and the acclamation of words for power; as soon as our bluff is called we are lost. […] Our transitional or makeshift societies do not cushion us. There are no universities or City houses to refresh us and absorb us after the heat of battle. For those who lose, and nearly everyone in the end loses, there is only one course: flight. Flight to the greater disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home counties.¹⁸

And although London represents ‘the greater disorder,’ this is never subjected to examination or analysis in any depth, and remains unproblematized. Even Singh’s final refuge, a desolate boarding house in England seems to fulfil the various kinds of lack he cannot find in Isabella. In fact it is from this cultural and ideological locus (of the unproblematized disintegrating Empire) that the Caribbean lack is articulated, thus exacerbating it profoundly. This lack, expressed as a lack of power, language, order, stability, education, comfort is multiple, and reinforces the hierarchical power of colonial knowledge as the narrator speaks from the very space which ostensibly possesses all these qualities and comforts. Thus, the postulation of London as a site of a ‘greater disorder’ and a ‘final emptiness’ has already been negated in several and multiple ways in Naipaul’s text, by citing a litany of Caribbean ‘lack,’ by which term he simultaneously feminizes and castrates the islands in a series of Lacanian-Freudian moves. Instead of a threat to the normalized knowledges Bhabha speaks of, this

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¹⁸ Naipaul, pp.6-7.
mimic man buttresses that very ideology of the superiority of colonial and patriarchal power in the western world.

To be sure, a displacement of power does occur with the emergence of the not-quite-white mimic writer, but if the values he endorses concur with those of colonial superiority then the effect is one of maintaining and sustaining colonial mythmaking. A mimicking subject would be quite unconscious of his mimicry of colonial values as these would be internalized to be a part of the psyche within which the subject’s viewpoint is constructed enabling him to offer a successful (colonial) *ideological performative* in the way that Naipaul’s writing does.

This is far from the notion of resistance that is encoded in Bhabha’s development of his concept of mimicry. Bhabha suggests that “Naipaul “translates” Conrad from Africa to the Caribbean in order to transform the despair of postcolonial history into an appeal for the autonomy of art.” He has already suggested that “ideological ambivalences riddle [Conrad’s] narratives. […] “The horror! The horror!” must not be repeated in the drawing rooms of Europe.”

The ideology whichsubstrates the grand mythmaking of the colonial and neo-colonial west to buttress its constructed notions of privilege and superiority is the force which in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) drives that encounter between Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended:

> ‘He was a remarkable man,’ I said, unsteadily. […] ‘It was impossible not to –’
> ‘Love him,’ she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness. ‘How true! How true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him well.’

In response to this and the later exhortation of Kurtz’s Intended: “‘His last word – to live with,” she insisted. “Don’t you understand I loved him – I loved him – I loved him!’” is the colonial lie that is shown to be in the process of being constructed. Marlow’s response is not mere ‘sly civility’ but informs the greater lie which prevents the truth of colonial methods from being articulated. ‘The horror!’ is the disclosure that Kurtz had ‘something wanting in him,’ that ‘he was hollow at the core,’ that ‘Kurtz [which] means short in German’ represented the lack encoded in colonial methods of domination and control. Far from analyzing the shortcomings of the colonials, Naipaul, like Marlow in his encounter with Kurtz’s Intended, is

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19 Bhabha, p.107.
20 Bhabha, p.107.
22 Conrad, p.121.
silenced by his colonial internalizations into telling a lie. Unlike Marlow’s narrative which cracks to reveal the unspeakable horror of colonialism, Naipaul seamlessly proceeds to enact a colonial ideological performative. This mimicry offers little resistance.

Bhabha’s theory of mimicry may have been valid at a time when the colonized Indian subject found himself relocated in the space of Empire, characterised in an ironic romanticism by Rushdie as Vilayet; at a time when hegemony (as experienced and offered by Naipaul, his mimic men, and Rushdie’s Chamcha) invisibly exerted its power within an insidious discursive web constructing the feeling of self-oppression and perceived cultural inferiority which imposed upon and determined the ethos of the colonized self in the presence of colonial authority. But how can this act of mimicry pose as a threat to normalized knowledges when it, in effect, seeks to replicate them as faithfully as possible?

Mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. Then the words of the master become the site of hybridity – the warlike, subaltern site of the native – then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain.24

If Bhabha is speaking of the idea of the master’s tools being transformed and used to dismantle the master’s house, this is because the master’s tools are in themselves ambivalent: counter-discourse has surfaced at irregular intervals in the west, giving rise to Michel Foucault’s argument for a discontinuous history which is sometimes subject to breaks in the apparently seamless and continuous episteme. At other times, it is able to admit ‘murmurs’ of oppositional thought25 which permeate and transform the patriarchal-colonial impulse which substrates mainstream western discourse.26 When the master’s tools are dispensed with, there is a turning back to traditional or mythological forms of discourse to offer resistance to colonial power (Mahatma Gandhi’s Sarvodaya; the Caribbean slaves’ myths such as Anansi which encouraged acts of dissidence and revolt); or a complete disavowal of antecedents (Negritude; the Harlem Renaissance).

24 Bhabha, p.121.
26 For a full discussion of the patriarchal impulse in the context of the feminist epistemic break see Godiwala, Breaking, pp. 3-8.
The Linguistic-Cultural Performative versus the Ideological-Cultural Performative

What Bhabha calls mimicry does, in part, arise from the relocation of the subject and depends on a certain ability to adapt and in part, assimilate of the culture the subject finds herself in. Minoli Salgado points out that in the choice of educational institutions and of occupations thereafter, post-colonial intellectuals like Rushdie, who ‘belong to an intellectual, aesthetic [and, it must be added, economic] élite,’ reveal their ‘sophisticated awareness of the linguistic and social nuances of [the] host culture, depending as they do on an ability to translate cultural codes and practices.’ Salgado’s remarks lead me to distinguish between the superficial mimicry of linguistic and social performativity, and the more dangerous mimicry of humanist values substrated by the racist ideology which found expression in Enlightenment thought.

A performative mimicry in terms of speech utterance and non-verbal cultural codes only points to an ability to engage with the complexities which govern the host’s linguistic and cultural codes and can be performed by a Burton as well as a Rushdie. The performative aspect of mimicry need not imply an underlying adherence to colonial ideologies. Rather, it merely indicates an ability to understand different cultures and thereby, in part, assimilate. However, mimicry such as that offered by Naipaul’s literary production is dangerous, because the racist assumptions which have informed western philosophers from Kant and Hegel to Marx, and become encoded in the literary and cultural production of the west, are now internalized and repeated in the attitude of those of colour towards the very non-white ‘third-world’ subjects they represent. This attitude, when situated in the cultural production of previously colonized subjects, is more dangerous than when it is encoded in white racist writing. This is because, firstly, it reassures those white readers whose cultural assumptions of supremacy have never diminished, that they are able, simultaneously, to also feel morally superior.

27 Minoli Salgado, ‘Migration and Mutability: The Twice Born Fiction of Salman Rushdie’, in British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945-1999, ed. by Alistair Davies and Alan Sinfield (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.31-49 (p.39). Rushdie was educated at Rugby and Cambridge University, and he worked as an actor and an advertising copywriter in London before he became a full-time writer. Salgado and other critics have pointed out that while the fluidity of migrant identity is potentially enabling, it is a privilege primarily reserved for an elite minority of the migrant communities who have the option to explore the liberating potential of liminal identities; a freedom predicated on a degree of social mobility denied to those who are bound by class, caste and economic circumstance to the lower echelons of society [at home or abroad] (see Salgado pp.39, 45).
as they are performing the liberal gesture of reading ‘Black’ literature. Secondly, it reinforces the feelings of cultural inferiority in, or, alternately, angers, ‘third-world’ readers more severely than if they had been ‘told so’ by a white writer, mainly because they may often identify with the ethnic origins and (post)colonial condition of the writer. Thus, a mimicry of humanist values which imposes the constructed notions of hierarchy and supremacy is dangerous and detrimental to the demise of internalized racist assumptions.

However, being able to mimic the linguistic and other cultural performatives of a given culture, whether Chinese, Japanese, Islamic or English, merely signifies the attempt to assimilate. A relative ease with the cultural performatives of others indicates a seemingly effortless skill which nonetheless indicates a certain mastery, like the Taoist paradox, \textit{wu-wei}. It also implies a respect for the different performatives of others, indicating an appreciation for those aspects of cultural production which are not marked by the values we need to confront and destabilise.

Living in a different culture for a period of time (and I do not mean as a tourist) is like Alice going through the looking glass: there is no return, as one has changed so much, often imperceptibly, that going back to one’s original perceptions is impossible. Languages, as we know, encode perceived cultural realities. A cultural hybridity of a dynamic kind often necessitates a learning of the language of the host, and this is as true for the English academic teaching in Paris as it is for the Tibetan refugee or asylum seeker relocated to India; it applies as much to the American who has lived twenty years in England as it does to the expatriate Englishman based in Istanbul. What distinguishes the level of fluency in the new language depends very much on the perceived cultural value of the language being learned: there is a very good chance that the English academic in France is more fluent in her new language than is the English bank manager in Turkey; that the Englishman in New York does not Americanize his accent as the New Yorker in England may well Anglicize his.

Similarly, the assimilation of cultural attitudes and behaviour – the ideological performative – is also hegemonically acquired and this is true not merely for Bhabha’s mimicking colonized subject. \textit{It is true of any hierarchized subject who perceives the values of another group as superior to his or her own} and aspires to the ideologically constructed behaviour, attitudes, and culture of that group, such as an English working class person

\begin{itemize}
\item[28] Or, indeed, befriending/marrying a person of colour, inducing at the level of social intercourse a hierarchical and unequal relationship.
\item[29] George Thomas, the eighteenth-century Rajah from Tipperary, completely forgot how to speak English as he became more comfortable with Persian and Hindustani. It is important to note that in this period the Mughal Empire was at its height and undeniably superior (see Dalrymple, \textit{White}).
\end{itemize}
aspiring to middle class status or a rural Indian peasant who imbibes the values or imitates the social practices of the powerful classes in his own country. However, living or based permanently in a different culture with its different organizing systems of class, economy, society and cultural production, it is incumbent on the relocated subject to hybridize rather than engage in what Bhabha defines as a mocking mimicry. This is a cultural hybridization by which the relocated subject displays a certain amount of cultural integration. Thus, the resemblance to the dominant culture that Bhabha speaks of, is achieved by linguistic performatives in an effort to find common ground with others one wants to engage with on social or intellectual grounds.

And that is what assimilation in a different culture entails: a gentle modification of one’s perceptual apparatus to accommodate foreign concepts (often embedded in language), and as a result the relocated subject arrives at a new way of perceiving which is necessarily different from, yet accepting of, both cultures he inhabits.

In the latter years of Hong Kong as a British colony, Europeans, Indians and Americans, and at a much lower economic scale, Pilipinos and Pilipinas, were expatriated in great numbers to this largely tax free, economic paradise. It was not unusual, of an evening, to find groups of people in bars, who were very diverse in terms of nationalities and cultures but brought together by a common hybrid identity by which they, often, had assimilated some aspects of the linguistic and other social performatives of the local culture (which was also hybrid, as the Hong Kongese established in 1997 when they perceived themselves as different to both, China and England). These liminal peoples marked and destabilised the boundaries of their own cultures as they assimilated from each other and also from the culture of their economic relocation: as Bhabha’s quotation of Martin Heidegger suggests, ‘the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.’

Qtd. in Bhabha, p.1; emphasis original.

As a recent conference call put it: ‘Hybridity, acknowledged as one of the key terms in postcolonial theory, most usually refers to “the creation of new transcultural forms from within the contact zone produced by colonization”’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998: 118). For theorists such as Homi Bhabha cultural hybridity posits a viable alternative to the ‘exoticism of multiculturalism,’ and opens the way toward ‘conceptualizing a [genuinely] international culture’ (Bhabha 1994: 38). The term, however, remains disputed. Robert J. C. Young has pointed out hybridity’s racist legacy, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has warned against the kinds of ‘hybridist triumphalism’ that celebrate the catch-all concept of ‘cultural difference’ without engaging sufficiently with specific cultural differences, or that are given to utopian visions of global transcultural communities despite the obvious fact that enduring racial prejudices, cultural biases and social hierarchies, all of which persist throughout much of the

30 Qtd. in Bhabha, p.1; emphasis original.
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In terms of previously colonized subjects who are permanently relocated in the geographical and cultural space of their erstwhile colonisers, perhaps Naipaul’s mimic men and Rushdie’s Chamcha reveal the persistence of the domination of the values of the latter in unconscious ways. Those revealed feelings of cultural inferiorities which make the Indian characters mimic and toady to English culture, (and indeed, writers such as Naipaul, likewise), have in time given way to subjects of fiction who valorize their way of life.

The opening years of the twenty-first century saw the production of Bapsi Sidhwa’s play, *Sock ‘Em with Honey* in London and New York.\(^{32}\) The Indian mother who travels to London to meet her daughter Feroza’s English-Jewish fiancé, is fluent in terms of language and modern attitudes – western social performatives – to be able to engage meaningfully with her daughter’s white English friends, as well as shed her sari, briefly, for hot pants. Simultaneously, she displays a fierce pride in Parsi tradition and customs. The twenty-first century has given us literature such as Sidhwa’s which has Britons delight in aspects of Indian cultural production such as exhibitions of Moghul miniatures, and drama about Indians in the West End.\(^{33}\) The Indian characters, mother and daughter, employ a linguistic hybridity, a performative versatility, as the daughter’s fiancé is also brought into this dynamic orbit of what John J. Gumperz calls ‘code-switching’ and Suzanne Romaine ‘language-mixing.’\(^{34}\) The daughter’s Jewish-English fiancé fluently uses Indian terms of endearment and the daughter, far from being a mimic man displays various linguistic and performative signs of being of a culture which does not hegemonically bow to the imagined or imposed superiority of western ways.

David’s opening words display a linguistic hybridity, comfortable with Parsi and English: ‘Good morning everyone … How are you luv? Mmm … You smell nice, don’t you … Come with me … let’s go to my room and mess around – a little kissy-koty?’ and so does Feroza: ‘Let her be, she’s having a bad day. I’ll get you coffee, jaan.’ This shows that the couple displays a linguistic performative which indicates their identification with and assimilation of each other’s culture and language. This is a new generation of intercultural marriages which do not cater to the cultural hegemony practiced

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\(^{33}\) There are two versions of Sidhwa’s play: one set in London with British characters and the other set in America (unpublished).

by past generations which privileged a hierarchy of colonial languages and cultures over the east within a mixed family.  

In *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Anita Desai juxtaposes the Indian way of life with the plastic, McDonaldised culture of America where the American characters are depicted as unstable in terms of family life, food habits and teenage angst. The Indian characters here, although varied and by no means ideal, represent a kind of solidity and permanence, albeit orthodox and patriarchal, when compared to the west’s declining social organizations and lack of intimacy or genuine communication.

The new fiction from Indian writers is symptomatic of cultures which were previously colonized by the west and were, by a process of Imperial ideology, robbed of a sense of self, which are in the twenty-first century regaining a sense of pride in the ancient culture to which they belong, learning, inside and outside of the universities based on western models of education that still educate them, that they had a literature, philosophy, and civilization of their own long before the West had developed a writerly mode. This sense of valorization of cultural identity produces, among the subjects of previously colonized places who relocate to the west, a sense of self denied to the subjects of the fiction of writers such as Naipaul. These relocated subjects, necessarily of an educated élite, appreciate and assimilate of the new cultures they are part of, and exist in a hybridization born of difference rather than mimicry. This is a difference in which the subjects of both cultures appreciate the cultural production of each without a sense of hierarchy and demonstrate fluid, flexible identities which are *enabling*.

Through the mode of language and thereby an appreciation of the cultural production of the foreign culture, whether minimal (as in the Englishman’s appreciation of Cantonese cuisine in Hong Kong whilst ignoring social contact with the indigenous Chinese), or maximal (as in making a contribution to the archive of the host culture’s cultural production and thereby becoming part of that archive), is the cultural hybrid formulated. The identity of the cultural hybrid is different from Bhabha’s colonial subject, the mimic man (whose attitude is constituted in the keen awareness of hegemony), and, in terms of posing a threat to the authority of the dominant culture of mainstream England, may do so in many different ways, through the multiple vectors of possessing an alternative race (which is now

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37 The first Indian philosophical text, *Rg-Veda*, was compiled in c. 1500 BCE by a team of scholars, one of them a woman.
recognised and practised as non-hegemonic) and/or a different sexuality. It is, in fact, difference rather than mimicry which poses the threat Bhabha speaks of. Although Bhabha’s concept does contain the notion of difference, it is born of the repulsion/attraction to colonial knowledge and discourse. Difference now arises from the valorization of self, which does not have to conflict with the appreciation of the Other.

Zygmunt Bauman, speaking of strangers in society, says that they ‘are the people who do not fit the cognitive, moral or aesthetic map’ of the particular society. These are the ‘people who conceal borderlines deemed crucial to [the] orderly and/or meaningful life [of a society], and are thus charged with causing discomfort experienced as the most painful and the least bearable.’ It is thus difference through which one can begin to challenge or destabilise colonial authority, as Rushdie does, for example, by bringing into the form of the English novel a dissidence forged through modes such as linguistic invention. His fluid evocations of eastern styles and forms sit, non-hegemonically, side by side with his appreciation and masterly deployment of western aesthetic modes. Rather than the attraction-repulsion which constitutes Bhabha’s ambivalent mimic mode, Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* consciously mocks the mimicking subject itself, but, more importantly, it is through these subjects that the author mocks the authority of colonial discourse as he destabilises the European genre of novel writing. Writing in English in a form which is and is not quite like the English novel, postcolonial novelists forge their fictions in a counter-discourse of resistance to the forms, styles and content of Eng. Lit., in difference rather than the ambivalent form of mimicry; a difference, moreover, which enables them, in Rushdie’s words, to ‘straddle two cultures’ with the ease of long acquaintance.

The politics of relocation and the construction of an identity of cultural hybridity does not in itself connote dissidence (which is an inherent aspect of Bhabha’s concept of mimicry’s ambivalence: one would assume that in this theory, repulsion from the coloniser ostensibly leads to the impulse to mock and dissent, whereas the attractions of his culture lead Bhabha’s mimics to toady and imitate). Cultural hybridization does however, in literary and other forms of cultural production, reveal a sense of the identity of an equally

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38 Confronted with an alternative sexuality, heterosexuality is reminded of what is repressed through normalization, and is thus threatened.


valorized non-western culture by the agent of production, which may in itself be threatening to the idea of a superior neo-colonial west.

In *The Satanic Verses*, whilst Rushdie characteristically destabilises the form and style of the novel, he simultaneously valorizes the Qur’ān, which functions as a potent non-western symbol of resistance and counter-discourse. Critics have seen the book as ‘a profoundly Islamic text,’\(^{41}\) and it can by no means be read as a text which mimics humanist values. Rather, by introducing the discourse of Islam as central to his text, Rushdie inscribes a profound alterity which serves to destabilise the traditional content of the novel form whilst it contests western norms and values. *The Satanic Verses* offers a potent counter-discourse to western literary production, which was unfortunately mis-read by Islamic fundamentalists, and succeeded in drawing from their closets white supremacists such as Fay Weldon, who, at one stroke denounced Hinduism and Islam in her 1989 pamphlet *Sacred Cows* in which she declared: ‘The Bible, in its entirety, is at least food for thought. The Koran is food for no-thought. It is not a poem on which society can be safely or sensibly based.’\(^{42}\) It is the reaction of Islamic fundamentalists to *The Satanic Verses*, rather than the aesthetic and formal qualities of the text itself, that has done more to damage the ways in which Islam is received in the west, by both, the liberals who condemned the public book-burnings by the Muslims and the censorious imposition of the *fatwa*, thereby denouncing all Muslims who apparently did not believe in the freedom of opinion and creative licence, and racists like Weldon alike.

If cultural hybridization in literary texts such as *The Satanic Verses* is seen as dissident, it is by a still dominant producer of western culture who cannot envisage non-western cultural production as possessing equal value to that of the west in terms of literature, philosophy and the arts: a leftover of Imperialist colonial thought. This tendency is also apparent in the field of contemporary western philosophy, which continues to remain resistant to acknowledging the numerous concepts from the *Veda, Vedanta* and Sanskrit poetics utilised by, for example, the late Jacques Derrida in his work, including the very influential ‘event’ of ‘deconstruction.’ As William S. Haney II puts it:

> The theory and practice of deconstruction, including the notions of difference, trace, supplementarity, play, iterability, phonoecentrism, and presence, not only share attributes with but can also be shown to follow indirectly from an earlier, eastern philosophical tradition largely unacknowledged in the work of western writers. […]W]estern critics by and large avoid eastern literary theory, partly out of fear of being stigmatized by

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association with [what is construed as] religion or what they misconstrue as subjectivism, mysticism or intuitionism.  

The persistent orientalist attitude which has either hierarchized or completely ignored (after having plagiarized) the Arabic and Indian ascendants of western cultural production as diverse as science and philosophy has never completely disappeared. (see Godiwala and Haney). Again, apart from a few scattered attempts to deconstruct the racist bases of Enlightenment thought by critics such as Young and, more recently, Robert Bernasconi, there seems a general acceptance of such ideology among contemporary philosophers, apparent from the relative lack of attention to unravelling these bases in philosophical critiques.

Postcolonial Desire

Cultural hybridization can be assimilationist in its difference, benign in the appropriation and acceptance which underlie its identity formation, as for example the expatriate European in an Eastern country today who may, as part of his cultural hybridization often marry locally, thereby legitimising and circumventing the nineteenth-century taboos on inter-racial sex and miscegenation. The ambivalent and conflictual discourse within which colonial desire was constituted now transforms into a legitimate postcolonial desire. This brings this article into the subject of racial hybridity, which, as theorised, is essentially the product of a white and non-white race; the child of a Glaswegian and a woman from Toulouse was never subject to the myths and taboos surrounding miscegenation in the nineteenth century as well as for much of the twentieth century. The racial hybrid was always the ‘dusky consequence’ of the largely illegitimate unions of black and white races, in a period which saw much of the world colonized by the latter. The discourse

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defining racial hybridity undergoes a gradual change, but what is needed is a radical metamorphosis in this, the twenty-first century, as the space occupied by the hybrid has been variously appropriated and thereby diffused by theorists whilst the focus on the biological hybrid remains ignored.

Hybridity: Naming and Defining the Hybrid Subject

It is the biological hybrid whose identity and space are continually attenuated by the diffused theoretical focus on hybridity. The theories of cultural hybridity have turned all cosmopolitan subjects into hybrids on a macro or global scale which denies the real hybrids a subject space. What is required is a discursive space which is not just defined but also named for the biological, and perhaps, inevitably, cultural hybrid. The indeterminacy of the identity of the biological hybrid needs to be supplanted with an inscription of the ethnicity of a subject who is the always-other. Naming this subject ‘hybrid’ is to re-claim, as Rushdie put it, ‘the name […] given in scorn.’

The colour of skin is perhaps the most arbitrary of signifiers that attaches itself to the racial other. Blackness was a signifier which was formulated in opposition to a non-homogeneous ‘white’ space. The signified was a racial other, quite specifically the colonized and, often, enslaved other. ‘White’ then was really a non-blackness, a state of being non-colonized: a space which represented the coloniser himself.

Since the Lumière brothers captured on film blackface minstrels on a London street in 1896, the Blacks have been represented in film and later, in television drama. In a narrative which resembles blacked up blacks, the London-based expatriate Parsi-Indian actor Nizwar Karanj was forced to ‘brown up’ for his role as sacrificial victim in Steven Spielberg’s 1984 film Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom and his role as servant in the 1980s BBC production Jewel in the Crown as he was ‘not quite brown enough’ to be Indian. On the other hand, the Bombay-based Indo-English actor, Karan Kapoor, who played a public-school educated Englishman in the same series, was not required to use brown make-up. Bhabha’s theory that the not-quite-whiteness of colonized subjects poses a ‘threat’ to White culture seems contested by the experience of the minstrels and Indian actors who might be far too light-skinned to conform to received stereotyped images of blackness or brownness of the colonized represented in performance and art. What is

47 Rushdie, Satanic, p.93.
performed – blacked-up blackness – conceals and disavows ‘what remains, opaque, unconscious, unperformable,’ i.e., the arbitrariness of colour. The materiality of the racialized body is abstracted into ‘Blackface’ impersonation which remains purely representational, to convey certain racial ideologies which are embodied in blackness; it becomes an allusion to what race embodies, a displacement and an abstraction in white cultures, such as ‘the savage other’ in Temple of Doom, and the hierarchies of the colonized in Jewel in the Crown.

In Freudian terms the dark continent is the negative feminine space which translated itself into the racialized space of a continent constituted as feminine. In Christian terms black is also the nomenclature for the non-Christian races which were seen as primitive, pagan and non-civilized. To conceptualize this different other required what Said calls orientalism, a technology of thought which produced a mechanism of othering in terms of knowledge and its subject. Orientalization was, in western rational terms, the performance of a site of excess, comparable to the Lacanian imaginary or the Kristevan hysteric which has no place in discourse. This Other collectively possessed a sign of difference, the arbitrary sign of the colour of skin.

If indeed the sign of the other is colour of skin described as ‘black’ which designates the non-white subject, then what of the miscegenated other? The term ‘miscegenated’ carries a negative valence; embedded in linguistic discourse it semantically transmits the burden of the colonial ideology which determined the instances of miscegenation resulting in unacknowledged progeny. The modern-day hybrid is hardly miscegenated (see below). Many cultures ranging from Latin America and the Caribbean to the more subtler biases which rule India have a hierarchy of society based on the colour of skin. The biological hybrid lives in a state of hybridization of cultures, languages, and indeed, colour. The hybrid can be dark as the night or light as ice. What race is this hybrid? Is her substance determined by the colour of her skin? Is she not marginalized into an unacknowledged site, a site of silence and non-definition, never spoken of except as less-than-white. And yet, is she not more than the sum of her parts? Born of an Indian mother and an English father does she not encompass them both? Does she not overspill the neat spaces they occupy: is s/he not more than rather than less than?

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The hybrid’s space of formation exceeds the sum of the geographical, cultural, linguistic and intellectual spaces of either of her parent’s cultures. In this sense, then, contemporary biological hybrid identity is an accretion and accumulation, an overflow or overspill, in a legitimate space which is always-different. The identity-space of, for example, the Sino-Irish hybrid differs significantly from that of the Indo-English hybrid. The latter exceeds the discursive domain of mere Englishness to spill over into the space of Indianness as she occupies both, linguistically and socially alternating between and, often, fluently combining the two discursive spaces. The product of twin histories, their contradictions contained in a fluid space of accreted knowledges, the biological hybrid performs an erasure of boundaries. Her identity is characterized by the strength and vitality called heterosis, the hybrid vigour scientists know they possess, as well as the dynamism which comes from occupying diverse cultural sites simultaneously and permanently.

It is time that theory created a positive space for the biological hybrids which are today seldom products of arbitrary miscegenation, but instead, products of legitimate unions. These children are wanted and loved and frequently brought up to embrace both cultures they inhabit. Perhaps the generation which emphasized the dominance of western culture over the eastern one in the upbringing of mixed-race children is now past. In these days of globalization and increased cultural contact between races in ways which make the aeroplane seem redundant, the biological hybrid may well rule the future. The internet has decreased insularity and possibly the doxa experience, along with cheap travel and the relative freedom (at least for the élite) to live in a country of one’s choice. Inter-racial marriages are common in most cosmopolitan locales all over the world, and the day of the hybrid may well be here. As has been famously uttered in the superior realm of western philosophy, the future colour of the world may well be brown.

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Dedication: This article is for Rohan and Natasha Mather. It is also for Stephen Michael McGowan.
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As a Tupi-Indian, Playing the Lute: Hybridity as Anthropophagy

Jeroen Dewulf

Abstract

Following the ideas, exposed by Édouard Glissant in *Poétique du divers* (1996), I claim in this article that there are no ‘pure’ languages and that all languages could be considered Creole-languages; English or German as much as Sranan-Tongo or Papiamento. This deconstruction of the myth of ‘pure’ languages introduces the question of the mythical alliance between mother tongue and literature. Subsequently it is possible to study the diverse literary answers to globalization from a new point of view which takes us from Creolism to the Brazilian *Modernismo*-Movement and the idea of Cultural Anthropophagy. Attempting to question the dominating paradigm in North American Postcolonial Studies, as reflected in Homi K. Bhabha’s vision on hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994), I seek to demonstrate that a Latin-American perspective on global Creolism and its consequences is able to liberate the existing theories of hybridity from their obsession with specific minorities or (post-)colonial structures.

Introduction

We live in a world where it has become less and less obvious that people accept to live in the same place where they were originally born. Moreover, as James Clifford shows us in his *Routes*, the human sciences have for over a hundred years foregrounded those who have chosen to stay at home. Inevitably, this has led to many fixed images and ideas, one of which involves the strange idea that languages, cultures, and even people have roots.

In *Rhizome*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari demonstrate how seriously Western thinking has been influenced by a secular obsession with roots. As an alternative, they propose a ‘nomadic’ form of thinking whereby passive roots are replaced by active rhizomes. As such thinking has gained popularity in recent cultural criticism, we are now confronted with a variety of terms describing the situation: Néstor García Canclini writes about ‘culturas híbridas,’ Serge Gruzinski about ‘la pensée métisse,’ Arjun Appadurai uses the expression ‘determinitorization,’ Édouard Glissant ‘créolisation,’ Wilson Harris ‘cross-culturality,’ Ulf Hannerz ‘transnational connections,’ Roger Bromley ‘syncretism,’ François Laplatine and Alexis

Nouss ‘métissage,’ and Jan Nederveen Pieterse ‘global mélange.’ What is quite amusing in this context is Vilém Flusser’s term ‘post-Neolithikum,’ since only now is humanity giving up its sedentary cultures. In Flusser’s view, traditional ‘values’ such as land-ownership, the inferiority of women and the defence of the nation were exposed only very recently as primary functions over farming and cattle breeding.

My intention in this article is not to discuss the – sometimes quite tiny – differences between these expressions. Rather, it seems more interesting to discuss the widely expressed view that a root-oriented way of thinking now appears to be understood as capable of offering solutions to the problems of modern society. While the above-mentioned expressions are mainly used in anthropology and sociology, and less frequently in linguistics, ‘creole ideas’ have been gaining more power in that discipline and thus appear to challenge the traditional, root-oriented barriers between creole and non-creole languages. In October 1999, at a conference on creolism at the University of Chicago, the question was raised as to the extent to which the difference between creole and ‘normal’ languages goes back to a Western imperialist

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4 Glissant rejects the term ‘métissage’ while, in his opinion, creolism always leads to unknown consequences, whereas the final result of a mixture can be anticipated (p.19). García Canclini is against ‘sincretismo’ and ‘mestizaje’ because these terms are apparently too reminiscent of racist theories (p.11). Bromley, on the other hand, defends exactly the opposite and rejects the term ‘hybridity’ because it goes back to nineteenth-century racial theories (p.189). For Nederveen Pieterse, ‘creolism’ and ‘mestizaje’ are too much ‘confined to the experience of the post-sixteenth-century Americas’ (p.54). Laplantine and Nouss reject ‘mélange,’ ‘mixité,’ ‘hybridité’ and ‘syncrétisme’ because these terms, in their view, stand for the dissolution of elements into a unified totality (p.7).

As a Tupi-Indian, Playing the Lute

and racist model. A similar idea has been presented by Hannerz, who writes: ‘There are a number of English-based creole languages in the world, yet hardly anybody would seriously argue that the English language is historically pure.’ In a similar vein, Glissant has expressed the following view: ‘Anyone studying reasonably the origin of all existing languages, including the French language, must conclude that almost all languages are originally creole languages.’

I propose that we should go one step beyond these ideas made by Hannerz and Glissant. In so doing, I suggest that the words ‘historically’ and ‘originally’ are to be omitted: I will defend the view that all languages – not only at the time of their inception – are to be considered as creole languages, in the sense that they are the results of a never-ending process of mixture. Indeed, creolity is, to use the terms of Mikhail Bakhtin, the ‘organic hybridity’ of each living language and indispensable for its survival. The fact is that no watertight criteria to distinguish exactly between creole and non-creole languages exist. This can be seen in the words of Michel DeGraff: ‘[A]ny property found in creole languages is [...] also found in some noncreole language.’ In fact, this distinction is mainly based on conventions, which are not beyond issues of power. As Salikoko Mufwene has put it, ‘[t]he main implicit criterion [to identify some new colonial vernaculars as creoles] which is embarrassing for linguistics but has not been discussed, is the ethnicity of their speakers.’ The definition of creole

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6 Hannerz, p.67.
7 Glissant, p.21. ‘Quand on étudie raisonnablement les origines de toutes langues données, y compris de la langue française, on s’aperçoit [...] que presque toute langue à ses origines est une langue créole’ (Glissant, p.21). All translations are by the author of this article.
8 Consider also the theory about Japanese as a creole language (cf. Glissant, pp.28f.).
9 Cf. Pnina Werbner, ‘Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity’, in Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism, ed. by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp.1-26: ‘Organic, unconscious hybridity is a feature of the historical evolution of all languages. Applying it to culture and society more generally, we may say that despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions. There is no culture in and of itself’ (pp.4-5).
10 Michel DeGraff, ‘Introduction’, in Language Creation and Language Change: Creolization, Diachrony and Development, ed. by Michel DeGraff (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), pp.1-46 (p.11). Cf. DeGraff: ‘There are no structural criteria which, in themselves, will identify a creole as such, in the absence of historical evidence’ (p.11), or Salikoko S. Mufwene, The Ecology of Language Evolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): ‘creoles have been grouped together and distinguished from other languages more because of similarities in the sociohistorical conditions of their development than for any other convincing reason’ (p.xii).
languages reminds one of the famous Yiddish expression that a language is nothing but a dialect with an army. In this context, the first Spanish grammar, which was created in 1492, the year America was discovered, could also be mentioned; the answer the bishop from Avila gave to Queen Isabel, when she asked him about the purpose of that grammar, tells its own story: ‘To govern, Your Majesty.’

Purity of Language?

It is because of that age-long obsession among linguists to find languages with an Adamic purity and because of the will to fix and structure languages geographically and historically,\(^1\) that languages, originated by the colonial clash and international slave-trade, for a long time did not receive the attention they deserved. The facts that all languages are the result of mixture and that foreign influence is a necessity for development was found hard to accept. This can also be seen in the fact that for centuries, obsessed with the idea of roots, linguists have frenetically fostered the myth of language purity. This has been particularly the case in Germany. The chimera of a pure German language is directly connected with the rise of German nationalism. In his *Discourses to the German Nation* (1808), Gottlieb Johann Fichte stresses constantly the importance of the purity of the German language and warns of the danger of the possible deterioration of the language as a result of mixing: ‘A [pure people with a pure language] may not accept people with a different origin and language and mingle.’\(^2\) As Fichte falsely thought, the fact that the Germanic languages did not originate from Latin is a proof of their purity, the presence of French – Napoleonic – troops on German territory was not simply a sign of humiliation but in the view of Fichte it was the first and irreversible step towards degeneration.

While German, and all other Germanic languages, are as much the result of age-long linguistic mixtures as are French or Spanish, the illusion of such German purity, and the conviction that German roots were never infected by foreign ‘contamination,’ survived for centuries. This process culminated during the Nazi dictatorship, when language was constantly used to ‘prove’ installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities’ (p.7).

\(^1\) Cf. William Labov: ‘Orthodox linguistic theory deals exclusively in terms of static models’ (qtd. in Ashcroft et al., p.46).

\(^2\) Gottlieb Johann Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (Leipzig, 1910), pp.212f. ‘Die ersten, ursprünglichen und wahrhaft natürlichen Grenzen der Staaten sind ohne Zweifel ihre innern Grenzen. [...] Ein solches kann kein Volk anderer Abkunft und Sprache in sich aufnehmen und mit sich vermischen wollen’ (Fichte, pp.212f.)
the purity of German culture and the impurity of others. The Nazi linguist Wilhelm Blaschke, for example, argued that ‘[t]he English orthography is a sign of the racial scandal of the English language and, in that way, of the English mind.’\textsuperscript{14} When Benito Mussolini decided to take measures to purify the Italian language, the calls for linguistic purification in Germany were also growing louder and louder. The German Ministry of Culture was flooded with wordlists from secondary school teachers, who all wanted to contribute to the noble aspiration of a completely pure German language – apparently, nobody considered that as a matter of course neither the word ‘Ministerium’ nor the word ‘Kultur’ are originally Germanic. The obsession with language purity was such, that the Ministry did not find any other solution but to forbid critical articles about German orthography in the newspapers and that none other than Joseph Goebbels himself accused the zealous teachers of Germanomania.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, reactions against foreign influences in languages seem to exist in all times and in all languages within all cultures. In \textit{Minima Moralia} (1951), Theodor Adorno calls foreignisms the ‘Jews of the language’,\textsuperscript{16} in this context, Thomas Y. Levin accused the plans of the French government in 1994 to forbid foreign (read: English) words in the official language as being a form of ‘linguistic anti-Semitism.’\textsuperscript{17} In fact, such a measure can only be explained as the result of an imperialistic and ahistorical way of thinking, where a specific phase in a historic process is considered to be ideal and, therefore, fixed. Anyone who wishes to purify the French language ultimately ends up with Latin and will have to state that even Classic Latin was full of foreign vocabulary.

The obsession with language purity used to be linked to Rousseau’s ‘Essai sur l’origine des langues’ and the rise of German Nationalism. Recently, Juan Ramón Lodares has expressed his doubts concerning the theory.\textsuperscript{18} In his view, the myth of pure languages with pure roots is part of a

\textsuperscript{14} Qtd. in Hanno Birken-Bertsch, \textit{Rechtschreibreform und Nationalsozialismus: Ein Kapitel aus der politischen Geschichte der deutschen Sprache} (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2000), p.46. ‘Die englische Orthographie ist ein Zeichen der Rassenschande der englischen Sprache und damit des englischen Geistes’ (Birken-Bertsch, p.46).

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Birken-Bertsch, p.44.

\textsuperscript{16} Theodor Adorno, \textit{Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben} (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1951).


\textsuperscript{18} See Juan Ramón Lodares, \textit{Lengua y Patria} (Madrid: Taurus, 2002), pp.23f. ‘En mi opinión, el canon nacionalcatólico (entendido este adjetivo de un modo más amplio del que habitualmente se le otorga) se forja mucho antes que las ideas romántico-naturalistas sobre la lengua como símbolo de identidad colectiva, es mucho más influyente que éstas en España, explica mejor nuestro caso y ayuda a comprender, no sólo la propaganda a favor del español, su elevación a
traditional Christian Weltanschauung because it goes back to the Bible, specifically to the history of the construction of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:9): ‘The myth of Babel itself is not about languages (languages are only a metaphor in this myth), but it is the myth – however with a real historical basis – of the creation of communities that are pure, unanimous, characterized by the language they speak.’

Ramón Lodares argues that the Babel-legend is based on a historical error, because ‘people are not separable because they speak different languages, as the biblical hagiography says; what happens is exactly the opposite: they speak different languages because they have been separated.’ Hermeneutics, however, interpreted the myth as if it were possible to separate people into different cultures because they were speaking different languages and therefore belonged to different races and different nations. Subsequently, external linguistic influences were considered to be dangerous, and the mixture of languages – like the mixture of races – to challenge God’s providence on earth. The Christian way of understanding cultural and linguistic difference was, therefore, according to Ramón Lodares, based on a form of purity and geographical fixation that, in reality, never existed. A completely different view was, however, promoted in the Islamic World. As Ramón Lodares shows, the Islamic Empire was originally based on the idea of a community of faith, which ought to be a single community, without

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19 Ramón Lodares, p.16. ‘El mito babélico no tiene que ver en sí mismo con las lenguas (las lenguas son sólo una metáfora en él), sino que es el mito – aunque responda a una base histórica real – de la creación de comunidades puras, unánimes, caracterizadas por la lengua que hablan’ (Ramón Lodares, p.16).
20 Ramón Lodares, pp.52f. ‘La gente no se separa porque habla lenguas distintas, como dice el hagiógrafo bíblico, sino todo lo contrario: habla lenguas distintas porque se han separado’ (Ramón Lodares, pp.52f.).
21 Ramón Lodares, p.52. ‘El hagiógrafo bíblico siempre ha interpretado el mito babélico de una manera muy sencilla: las gentes se separan porque hablan ‘lenguas’ distintas, es decir, porque tienen ‘razas’ distintas, es decir, porque son de ‘nación’ distinta. Al ser la lengua el índice de pureza racial, se justifica la separación de razas, lo inconveniente de las mezclas y la supeditación de todas a la de Abram’ (Ramón Lodares, p.52; emphasis original).
22 See, therefore, also Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): ‘The Arabic Qur’an and authoritative Christian translations of the Bible into a limited number of languages contributed profoundly to the universalisation of a single-religious-linguistic community in the Muslim case and to the distinction between major written languages and dialectic vernaculars in the Christian case. While the Islamic socio-political impact was thus in principle almost entirely anti-ethnic and anti-national, the Christian impact was more complex. Its willingness to translate brought with it, undoubtedly, a reduction in the number of ethnicities and vernaculars, but then a confirmation of the individual identity of those that remained: Christianity in fact helped turn ethnicities into nations’ (p.179).
national distinctions, united by the sacred language of the Qur’ān. It was in the Iberian Peninsula that both views of language variety shocked; the Christian victory over the Islam in the Reconquista meant, therefore, also the victory of a Christian view concerning the relationship between language and religion. In consequence, Ramón Lodares assumes that the linguistic variety in the Christian World might have been quite different had Christ written the Gospel himself – in that case, Christianity would have had his sacred language.

Christianity may not have a sacred language but it has a sacred book. Hence, it seems important to complete Ramón Lodares’s view with the importance of the Scripture in Christian thinking by thinking through its implications. One of the essential consequences of writing is that something can be fixed and checked in cases of doubt or discussion. As Michel de Certeau argues, writing gives you the opportunity to ‘maintain things in their pure form’ because ‘it accumulates, it stocks the “secrets,” it doesn’t lose anything, it conserves them intact. It’s archive.’ In other words, writing is an essential element that permits cultures to have absolute truths. It also provides them with the possibility of guaranteeing the purity of these truths. As the doctrine of Christianity is fixed by the Scripture, it can be argued that a Christian way of thinking is logically much less flexible and much more marked by the idea of purity than is the case in cultures where God’s Word has not been written down. To make this clear, I will discuss briefly what happened to the Tuparí, a small Indian community in western Brazil, after Swiss anthropologist Franz Caspar visited them in the early 1950s.

**Purity vs. Adaptation**

Caspar’s diary of his half-year stay with the Tuparí shows clearly how the Indians tried to keep him in their community by any means. What they saw in Caspar was the ideal intermediary between them and the outside world. So, one day, he was confronted with the question if his father was the chieftain of

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23 Ramón Lodares, p.70. ‘El Imperio mundial basado en la fe islámica nace con vocación de crear una comunidad de fe, pero también una comunidad lingüística, sin naciones, con la posesión de un idioma sagrado’ (Ramón Lodares, p.70). It goes without saying that, in practice, Islam was never capable of realizing this objective and that Urdu, Persian and Turkish are major Islamic languages in which decisive Islamic scholarship has been produced.

24 Ramón Lodares, p.68. ‘Cabría suponer – digo suponer – que si Cristo hubiera escrito los Evangelios en arameno de su puño e letra, el veinte por ciento de la población mundial que hoy profesa alguna forma de cristianismo tendría nociones de esa lengua’ (Ramón Lodares, p.68).

the tribe of the ‘Suissos.’ In an imprudent reaction, Caspar said yes. As a result of this, the Tupari asked him to become their future chieftain. To make this possible, they decided to adapt their religious dogmas, including Switzerland in their worldview:

Those people, who Arotä let escape from under the ground, did all not find a place to live. We, the Tupari, could stay here, the others had to migrate in all directions. They now are our neighbours: the Arikapú, Jabutí, Makuráp, Aruá and all other tribes. Also the Brazilians, the Bolivians, the Americans, the Germans and the tribe of your father, the Suissos, they all come from here and migrated a long time ago, because there was no place for so many people.26

Religious flexibility of this kind was possible only because the Creation story of the Tupari did not exist in writing. In a Christian worldview, such dramatic adaptations are unimaginable. Should new forms of life be discovered on Mars tomorrow, no Christian would seriously promote the idea of adding a seventh or eighth day of Creation to the Book of Genesis. By dogmatizing the Bible as the written word of God, Christianity has come to reinforce the idea of purity, which is already prominent in such myths as the legend of Babel.

To deconstruct the myth of a pure language with pure roots means that the mythical alliance between mother tongue and literature is questioned. Without doubt, one of the most interesting views in this context has been presented by Homi K. Bhabha. In The Location of Culture, Bhabha presents the view that today no culture can appeal to its ‘purity’ and underlines the importance of hybrid ‘in-between spaces,’ ‘displacements’ and ‘unhomely fictions.’ Yet Bhabha tends to connect these discourses almost exclusively to emigrants, post-colonials and specific minorities in the West Afro-Americans, Chicanos, etc,27 which is somewhat controversial. Bhabha, indeed, has been criticized for claiming that migrants and minorities by definition produce progressive discourses, which as such might be considered quite a romantic simplification.28 In this context it is also possible to refer to

27 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.5, 12, 158, 247.
the case of the Netherlands, where the strongest rejection of gay marriage has emanated from the Muslim community. Moreover, as Aijaz Ahmad has pointed out in his essay ‘The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality,’ the glorification of a post-colonial, transnational hybridity has little to do with the social situation of most emigrants.\textsuperscript{29} R. Radhakrishnan, also arguing against Bhabha, suggests that the ethnic diasporic self is in fact seeking validation as a constituent: ‘Rather than glorify the immigrant moment as a mode of perennial liminality, the diasporic self seeks to reterritorialize itself.’\textsuperscript{30} Peter van der Veer adds that Bhabha overlooks that the literature he cites is anything but revolutionary, as all works are issued by Western publishers and sold to an almost exclusively Western intellectual elite. He therefore argues that the hybridity celebrated by Bhabha ‘has little revolutionary potential, since it is part of the very discourse of bourgeois capitalism and modernity which it claims to displace.’\textsuperscript{31}

It is possible to go further and to ask whether Bhabha’s tendency to focus so much on migrants and minorities runs the risk of leading to a contradiction. In fact, if we accept in the manner of the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo that hybridity has always been a characteristic of all cultures,\textsuperscript{32} it is untenable to restrict hybridity to some specific groups within or between cultures. Indeed, as the world has always been one big conglomerate of in-between spaces, we all are hybrid, even if we do not wish to admit it. While I do not pretend that, if all cultures are hybrid, it does directly follow that Bhabha and many others are wrong to emphasize particularities of creolization in colonial/postcolonial contexts, marked as they are by dramatic imbalances of cultural power and the co-presence of very different languages. In any case, it appears to be quite a dangerous tendency to exclude some cultures and people from the ‘hybrid discourse.’

Every human being should have a right to his/her hybridity, even those who are not ‘post-colonial’ or who are not part of an ethnic minority. So when, for example, the German post-colonial studies specialist Doris Bachmann-Medick writes about the concrete practise of cultural translation

\textsuperscript{31} Van der Veer, p.104.
‘in “mixed” cultures’ and immediately localizes such cultures ‘in India or in
syncretic societies in Latin America,’ where ‘the Indian and creole languages
are [...] composed of a mingle of different languages,’\(^{33}\) she is completely
overlooking, as many other post-colonial critics do, that all European
languages, cultures and nations are profoundly hybrid, or, as Nederveen
Pieterse argues, that ‘the West itself may be viewed as a mixture and Western
culture as a creole culture.’\(^{34}\) If one insists on limiting one’s interest to some
specific groups, there is no choice but to reject a creole and hybrid way of
thinking – as also Lucien Dällenbach did by defending a ‘pensée-mosaïque’
and, consequently, rejecting a ‘pensée-métisse.’\(^{35}\) The question arises
whether such a ‘mosaic way of thinking’ will eventually not lead to reverse
essentialism. Not without reason, Bart Moore-Gilbert questions Bhabha over
‘the danger that the hybrid (and the postcolonial space or identity it
represents) will itself become essentialized,’\(^{36}\) and Leela Gandhi warns of an
‘opportunistic postcolonial scramble for the ethnic margin.’\(^{37}\) In an attempt to
question the dominating paradigm in North-American postcolonial studies, I
intend to turn back to my initial ideas about creolism and try to apply them to
contemporary literary theory. At the same time, I propose to concentrate on
Brazilian culture, particularly on some basic ideas of the so-called
‘anthropophagic movement.’

**Anthropophagical Solution**

For many centuries, Brazilian culture was characterized by a clear tendency
to imitate Europe. All aspects of Brazilian society that were not, by one
means or another, ‘euro-compatible’ (from the afro-Brazilian religions over

\(^{33}\) Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Übersetzung als Repräsentation fremder Kulturen* (Berlin: Erich
Schmidt Verlag, 1997), p.21. As she puts it: ‘An diesem Punkt erhält auch die metaphorisch
anmutende Perspektive von “Kultur als Übersetzung” einen konkreten Bezug, vor allem sobald
man die “gemischten,” zusammengesetzten Kulturen selbst betrachtet, wie etwa diejenigen in
Indien oder in den synkretistischen Gesellschaften Lateinamerikas. Diese sind unausweichlich
auf Übersetzung angewiesen – nicht nur zwischen Texten, sondern auch zwischen den
verschiedenen kulturinternen Traditionssträngen und Erfahrungsschichten einer komplexen,
gleichzeitigen Lebenswelt. Schliesslich sind die indischen oder kreolischen Sprachen selbst
interlingual angelegt, d.h., sie bestehen bereits ihrerseits aus einer Mischung verschiedener
Sprachen’ (p.16).

\(^{34}\) Nederveen Pieterse, p.54.


p.129.

the tropical nature in the rain forests to the mulatto-population) were marginalized and/or diabolized. Consequently Afro-Brazilian religions were officially prohibited and their followers persecuted, the rain forest was described as a ‘green hell,’ and mulattos were seen as a danger to public health and order. Even after the independence of the country in 1822, Brazilian artists continued to ‘play colonially safe,’ as Mário de Andrade wrote, ‘repeating and expressing merely aesthetics that were already sacred.’ However, in the 1920s, with the birth of the modernismo movement, the perception gained force that the obsession with European ideals only originated frustrations and that the richness of Brazilian culture was to be found in the originality of its creole society, compounded by the mixture of Indian, Portuguese, and African culture and enriched in the nineteenth century by the immigration of hundreds of thousands of Italians, Germans, Japanese, Poles, and Arabs. The central idea of this modernistic turn in Brazil was expressed by the word ‘anthropophagy’: just as the Indians once ate their rivals to incorporate their qualities, in the same way Brazilian culture has become ever stronger by devouring foreign influences. Hence the modernists did not complain about the alleged lack of purity – on the contrary, they celebrated the creolization of Brazilian culture.

A case in point is that in the most important novel of the modernist period, Mário de Andrade’s Macunaíma (1928), Brazilian history begins in the rain forest and not with a (European) discovery. On their way to modern Brazilian society, the three Indian ‘founding-fathers’ of the nation change colour by taking a magic bath; the first washes himself completely white, the second has only enough water to become brown, leaving only a few drops behind for the third, who remains black and just manages to change slightly the colour of the palms of his feet and hands.

It is interesting to see how this novel complicates contemporary postcolonial theories as we find them in Bhabha’s The Location of Culture. Here Bhabha cites a number of texts that are written after the example of Montesquieu’s Lettres Persanes (1721) and firmly criticizes this genre:

Montesquieu’s Turkish Despot, Barthes’s Japan, Kristeva’s China, Derrida’s Nambikwara Indians, Lyotard’s Cashinahua pagans are part of this strategy of containment where the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation. The Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment. Narrative and the cultural politics of difference become the closed circle of interpretation. The Other loses its

38 Mário de Andrade, O movimento modernista (Rio de Janeiro: Casa do Estudante do Brasil, 1942), p.46. ‘Com alguma excepção individual rara [...] os artistas brasileiros jogaram sempre colonialmente no certo. Repetindo e afeiçoando estéticas já consagradas [...]’ (Andrade, Movimento, p.46).
power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse.

The problem here is that Bhabha only cites Western authors who speak for non-Western people. But what happens when a non-Western author starts working with this genre? This is precisely what happens in *Macunaíma*, a work that represents a definitive split in the 400 years of European cultural imperialism in Brazil. Following the originally French *Lettres Persanes* genre in *Macunaíma*, Mário de Andrade sought to characterize Brazilian culture and to define the difficult question of Brazilian identity and created a marvellous example of literary creolism.

It is no coincidence that authors such as Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade, the leading figures of the Brazilian *modernismo*-movement, occupy a central position in Pascale Casanova’s work *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. In this work, Casanova attempts to study literature in a ‘planetary’ way. She concentrates on the period in which the separation between French and vulgar Latin was not yet completely clear, in other terms, a period in which the creole character of French was still obvious. One of the central points of her study is based on the expression ‘dévorer des langues’ – devour languages. In this connection, she starts to speak about Brazilian literature and connects Joachim du Bellay and Dante (who, both in their own way ‘devoured’ Latin) with the anthropophagy of Portuguese language, as it was propagated in Oswald de Andrade’s literary manifest, when he, in an allusion to the Tupi-language of Brazilian Indians, argued: ‘Tupi or not tupi, that is the question.’ As famous as the question was the answer given by Mário de Andrade in *Macunaíma*: ‘I am a Tupi-Indian, playing the lute.’ Thus, the solution defended by Mário de Andrade is neither ethno-fundamentalism nor complete Occidentalization. Rather, it is an anthropophagical and active solution the result of which is a creolisation that definitively breaks with static, (post-)colonial patterns of thought.
As a Tupi-Indian, Playing the Lute

Naturally, Brazilian society with its enormous problems cannot be presented as an example for the rest of the world, and it should be noticed that recent commentators have noted how limited is the role that actual native cultures were allowed to play in the work of de Andrade and of others following the Manifesto Antropofágico. Yet instead of calling up, time after time, the spirit of cultural uniformity, and instead of slipping back into linguistic anti-Semitism, anthropophagy may nevertheless be seen as a significant attitude towards globalization. It stands for absorbing foreign influences, knowing and accepting, that afterwards one will never be the same again.

If we hear how in the past few years, the call for a new language in literature has been getting louder and louder, it may be Salman Rushdie and his search for ‘new languages to understand the world,’  


49 This vision of language and literature is very similar to Hannerz’s appeal for a new social consciousness: ‘There were always interactions, and a diffusion of ideas, habits, and things, even if at times we have been habituated to theories of culture and society which have not emphasized such truths’ (p.18).
pleased, if the text I am writing now, was not legible any more in a hundred years, because language had changed so much. But unfortunately, the language purist will dash my hopes.50

I do recognize that a creole or anthropophagical way of thinking in literature contends with a certain naiveté in relation to the existing structures of power. Nonetheless, I consider that the worldwide creolization can be seen as a natural process, in the way of Glissant’s vision of life and culture ‘en perpétuel processus.’ The biggest mistake one can make in this process, is to hold still.51 Indeed, accepting creolism means necessarily to reject all forms of absolute truths and to consider all theories and identities as being transitory.

Maybe this is all just a dream: maybe my idea of a creolized world is no more than one more myth alongside all the others. But even if it is only a dream, it is a beautiful dream, almost as beautiful as the one shown in Loetscher’s novel Die Augen des Mandarin (The Eyes of the Mandarin) (1999), where global creolization is formulated in a unique way. It is done on the basis of New Year’s Day:

On New Year’s Day, we are always full of good intentions, a couple of weeks later they are all broken and we must wait months before we, at a new New Year, can make new intentions. This would be completely different, if only three or four weeks after the first of January, you could make new intentions at the Chinese New Year and if you only had to wait until the Buddhist New Year to refresh those intentions you had broken in the meantime – yes, the good intentions you made at the Muslim New Year and you did not keep, could be renewed at the Jewish New Year, and after breaking those good intentions, you only had to wait until the first of January. We called this ‘The Chorus of the New Beginning’ or, less poetically, the ‘Round New Year.’52


51 Cf. Laplantine and Nous in their comment on Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction: ‘Ne pas rester en place, [...] être en marche. Être métis dans le rapport à la pensée des autres mais non moins par rapport à sa propre pensée’ [Not to stay in the same place, [...] to move on. To be a mestizo with regard to other thoughts but no less with regard to your own thoughts] (p.192).

52 Hugo Loetscher, Die Augen des Mandarin (Zürich: Diogenes, 1999), p.332. ‘An jedem Neujahr fasst man Vorsätze, nach einigen Wochen sind sie gebrochen, und man muss viele Monate warten, bis man an einem neuen Neujahr neue Vorsätze fasst. Das ist anders, wenn man schon drei bis vier Wochen nach dem ersten Januar am chinesischen Neujahr von neuem Vorsätze fasst und man nur bis zum buddhistischen Neujahr zu warten braucht, um zu erneuern, was man inzwischen gebrochen hat – ja, was man sich am Neujahr der Muslime vorgenommen und woran man sich hinterher nicht gehalten hat, das könnte am jüdischen Neujahr erneuert werden, und das, was von jenen Vorsätzen nicht eingehalten wird, könnte man am ersten Januar erneuern, dessen gebrochene Vorsätze wiederum. Wir nannten dies “den Reigen des Neuanfangs” und weniger poetisch das “runde Neujahr”’ (Augen, p.332).
What more could we today wish for our world than a similar round and creolized New Year?

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As a Tupi-Indian, Playing the Lute

Strategic Hybridity: Some Pacific Takes on Postcolonial Theory

Paul Sharrad

Abstract

Debates around postcolonial theory often arise from misunderstandings owing to translation from one disciplinary context to another. This article acknowledges real material limits to text-centred theory and critiques the uninspected use of hybridity as a concept/textual practice of subversion. The term has a range of meanings and does different work in different situations. Using examples from modern writing in the Pacific region, a situated dynamic of juxtaposed elements defined as ‘syncretic counterpoint’ is argued for. This conflictual mix resists both hybrid amalgamation and irony, permitting an assertion of indigenous difference that simultaneously allows for modern globalised complexity.

Introduction

The problem and promise of literary theory these days is its translation across disciplines and the differing expectations of what work a concept should do in each field. Shakespeare once famously asked what’s in a name; well, a good deal if you pay any attention to the debates over what ‘postcolonial’ means and whether it should have a hyphen or not, and regardless of that outcome, why its invention and now wide and often indiscriminate deployment has not changed the world yet. (One answer to this last question is, indeed, that we have spent so much time arguing over language and concepts that the political reconstruction of the world motivating the postcolonial project as a whole has been sidelined.) The same can be said of how ‘hybridity’ has entered intellectual and political discourse, and the jury is still out on the usefulness, both of the debate and the term itself.

The reason for all the expenditure of hot air is in fact a problem of translation and one fundamentally grounded on metaphor. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft and others have suggested, extrapolating from Roman Jakobson, via Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin, that there is a broad equivalence between monologic ‘imperialist’ textuality and the assimilative function of metaphor, whereas the always incomplete nature of metonymy lends itself more to narrativising small-scale resistances against larger structures of totalising power.1 Frankly, in line with Mac Fenwick, I find the

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two modes of expression interconnected and it could be argued that Wilson Harris (one of the more open-ended deconstructivists of grand narratives and monolithic forms) operates through a sliding string of metaphors that work metonymically every time the inadequacy of their expressive reach is shown up by the shift to a connected but different image.\(^2\) The effect is to give us a sense of a hybrid text. Indeed, Wilson Harris’s use of cultural sources is nothing if not eclectic, ranging from contemporary West Indian events to Dante, from Scots literature to Arawak myth, Inca symbology to Rimbaud to Patrick White to Herman Melville. The prose, though, rests on a consistent poetic of flux that paradoxically acquires its own solidity (which is why Harris always revises/revisions his work).

There is a fine poem by Caribbean-Canadian Claire Harris that shows up the role of metaphor in managing difference. It illustrates the limits and potentials of difference, bypassing hybridity altogether, though not dispensing with ideas of pluralised lateral juxtaposition rather than hierarchised systems that hybridity theory has looked to. In the guise of a personal relationships theme, her ‘Variations Two’ speaks of contingent situational coexistence that permits both togetherness and separate, unresolvable difference:

\begin{verbatim}
After rain light falls across bowls of fruit on the table
startling the apples the green and yellow oranges into clarity
they become the essence of orange of apple
you stand on this using it as your metaphor
saying choose
I have never understood why I should
the delicate pink and white of apple blossoms
or the sharp citrus tang of orange trees
I want them both in different seasons
as I want you sprawled across the bed taking up
your half and mine on some days
the clever geometric sheets incredible undone
your knee at my back
But there are days I make my bed
with drifts of snow or apple blossoms
and want to lie in it alone enjoying the expansive calm
the different silences\(^3\)
\end{verbatim}

I am inclined to favour this ‘both/and’ solution to the ‘either/or’ problem, except that this in itself is a choice and some people are not in a position to exercise such freedom, especially if society tells them they themselves are an


\(^3\) Claire Harris, ‘Variations Two’, in *Traveling to Find a Remedy*, by Claire Harris (Fredericton: Goose Lane Press/Fiddlehead, 1986), p.35.
‘unnatural’ blend of apple and orange, not just ‘divided to the core’ (with apologies to Derek Walcott) but inseparably mixed throughout.

My point here is that simple binaries of metaphor/metonymy, colonial/postcolonial, identity/hybridity, do not have more than a pragmatic value on a sliding scale of differences. The shifts in metaphoric guise enacted in Claire Harris’s work (theatre, mask, cloak, mesh of hair, web of light, fabric of water, sound of waves, cry of peacock, music of flute, flute of bone, sacrifice, altar, rock, Zemi carving, cultural archaeology, and so on) are also enacted in theory when it repositions a term and in doing so changes its range of associations to the befuddlement of students and exasperation of teachers. Thus, there are all sorts of hybridity, and each type does different cultural work in its particular context. There may be a carry over of some significance into a new context, but – as Salman Rushdie would say – a lot is lost and some things are also gained in the translation.4 We need to be comparative linguists of critical practice to fully appreciate the meanings of a term as it moves around, sliding under, slipping through, breaking down fences between fields of enquiry.

Multiple Hybridities

The Empire Writes Back, trying to avoid the oppositional resistance trap or reproducing in different ‘words’ the same ‘language’ of the displaced oppressor, advocates hybridity as the theoretical model characterising postcolonial practice (mainly textual, although it has wider implications). Homi K. Bhabha is perhaps the paramount chief whose mana infuses this book, with Wilson Harris as his creative counterpart.5 And while there are many positive aspects to the work this (initially descriptive) book performed within the academy – especially in its decolonising of English Literature and potentially Comparative Literature studies – it does seem to play fast and loose with its terminology at times. Thus, in the second edition, ‘hybridity’ is often paired synonymously with ‘syncretism’ though at times the writers appear to favour the latter term,6 hinting at some unspecified difference. These two also seem to flow into ‘bricolage,’ ‘métissage’ depending perhaps on whether the subject at hand is language-use, genre experiment or personal identity. Here we have the metaphor problem, or the problem of translation from one disciplinary or linguistic context to another: that which is or is not ‘carried over’ in the sum of postcolonial difference/s. Bhabha himself and

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5 Ashcroft et al., pp.32-6, 145-52.
6 Ashcroft et al., pp.29-30.
later Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recognise that always something is not translatable, that postcolonial experience is felt and represented as ‘catachresis,’ ‘rupture,’ and ‘crisis,’ or conflicting ‘incommensurate’ pluralities of difference that relate to each other not as a harmonious developmental aggregation, but as discontinuities in which the hybrid marks a splitting rather than/as well as a joining. I think, in fact, that there is not a lot of disagreement here, in that, while Wilson Harris’s texts rely on metaphor and at times tend towards a modernist metaphoric/symbolic recuperation of organic harmony (hybridity), the ‘syncretism’ that Ashcroft and others find in his work is that partial, shifting, self-revising metonymic quality arising from a realpolitik (or real-poetic) of syncretic collocation of disparate energies without more than a visionary intimation of hybrid coherence. So I would not take issue finally with The Empire Writes Back when it asserts that ‘[s]yncretism is the condition within which post-colonial societies operate,’ save to reject the original dictionary definition of bringing together contradictory elements to produce a unified system.

A reading of Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s Globalization & Culture: Global Melange makes it clear that theories of hybridity tend to favour culturalist views to the exclusion of material realities: that they arise out of global labour movements impelled by the facts that 14% of world ran 80% investment flows between 1980 and 1991 and that the income ratio of the top 20% of population to the bottom 20% has grown from 30:1 to 78:1 in the period 1960-94. Such statistics show how any debate over the subversive/innovative power of hybridity is itself a product of a market globalisation that is continuous with histories of imperialism. Hybridity is not a solution to a problem so much as a symptom of it, even though it may offer small tactical gains within the wider global strategy of capital. We can, however, add that the ‘master narrative’ of global capital is itself a ‘hybrid’ phenomenon, since for all its pretensions to universal oneness, its practice is localised and thus relativised in every iterative instance of its imposition of power. Banking in India is not the same experience as banking in Australia, though both experiences tend towards the mechanised uniformity of the global ATM.

Nederveen Pieterse sees Anthony Giddens’s modernity thesis as too westernising and historically shallow and looks to multiple paths of

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9 Ashcroft et al., p.148.
10 Ashcroft et al., p.178.
modernisation in which all societies create their own modernities.\footnote{Nederveen Pieterse, pp.62-3.} He goes on to note that the cultural mixings are very complex, internally and across boundaries: intercultural osmosis and global mélange, setting up a sliding scale of hybridisations from one pole of assimilation to its opposing resistant localism. In keeping with Bhabha and Spivak, he does not see this as a smooth continuum of free choice: ‘Still what are not clarified are the terms under which cultural interplay and crossover take place. In terms such as global melange, what is missing is acknowledgment of the actual unevenness, asymmetry and inequality in global relations.’\footnote{Nederveen Pieterse, p.71; emphasis original.}

Robert J. C. Young provides a history of the uses of hybridity from the Enlightenment through nineteenth-century imperialism, sketching how the biological discourses, whether positive (the enriching of the world’s races through fertile ‘amalgamation’) or negative (the ‘unnatural’ miscegenation of different species producing the infertile downfall of both) tended to reproduce ideas of a central unity and operate within conservative nationalist-racist parameters. Even pluralistic hybridity itself (the idea of England as an amalgam of racial qualities with a macaronic language) could be co-opted as a unifying ground of national authenticity and racial-imperialist merit. Hybridity has come to stand for the interrogative languages of minority cultures’ and ‘the syncretism that characterizes all postcolonial literatures and cultures.’\footnote{Robert J. C. Young, \textit{Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race} (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.24-5.} Such an oppositional hybridity becomes itself ‘an organic hybridisation’ that serves as a unified abstract resisting/subverting some totalising mode of power, be it state, cultural ethnocentrism or literary canon.\footnote{Young, pp.24-5.}

Young makes the point that hybridity theory arises out of modernity’s ‘transformation of both metropolitan and colonial societies’ until the contemporary celebration of ‘mobile and multiple identities’ reflects not (or not only) global movements, but also ‘a new stability, self-assurance and quietism.’\footnote{Young, p.4.} It is a luxury (Spivak would say ‘ruse’ along with postcolonial studies\footnote{Spivak, pp.363-4.}) to which those lower on the circuits of global power who experience life as conflict, dispossession and migration have no access. Hybridity is a history of struggle between ‘unification and differentiation,’ or as Herbert Spencer put it, ‘the homogeneous and the heterogeneous’ – one that continues on into contemporary constructions of multiculturalism.\footnote{Young, pp.4-5.}
Let’s be clear that ‘hybridity’ rarely means what it implies at first sight. Mixing cultural practices is not the same thing as being born of inter-racial unions, and that is not identical with carrying one’s skin colour, identity and culture into an alien society. The taxonomy of racial quotients may reflect a dehumanising obsession with social rank and scientific classification, but it did recognise a certain specificity other than bland ‘hybridity’ when it saw distinctions between a creole woman, a mulata and someone of altogether African origin. Such distinctions we reject when used prejudicially by those within majority or hegemonic power against their less privileged fellows, but they are important when indigenous minorities seek to resist their enforced disappearance into an homogenised national rhetoric of ‘we are all migrants together’ or a globalising myth of happy cosmopolitan hybridity.

Those literalists who cannot look beyond the biological aspect of hybridity (arguing that we cannot use it even as a figure of textual politics because it implies the sterility of the mule; we do not approve of it because it suggests the artificial making of the hot-house plant rather than natural indigenous flora) miss the point of a cultural attack on essentialist discourses. But the ‘poets’ who play about with language as a cultural rather than racial vehicle can equally lose sight of the real power located in specific circumstances. Hybridity is no more a universal subversive panacea to hegemony than it is an empty label signifying a cynical exploitation in the consumption of global chic, but it is something of both, and it has a number of faces that are more or less efficacious depending on their particular context of use. It could be argued that hybridity theory, as it has been circulated within Humanities scholarship, rests largely on its appeal to intellectual spokespeople for hyphenated first-world immigrant constituencies: Bhabha sketching the complex dynamic of identity struggle for people of colour in Britain, Gloria Anzaldúa empowering the Hispanic borderlands of the United States. It has also emerged as a vehicle for valourising the hybridising of race and language in the Caribbean region as a means of countering that ‘area of darkness’ generated by dominant models of individual nations with uniform culture and language, if not also race. In these modes, hybridity theory underpins the agonistic assertion of hybridity’s stresses and strains as a claim on social reforms and the right to equal citizenship. For indigenous groups, especially those in the minority within their national spaces, it is more a project of rejecting hybridity in order to claim an essential originality from which to claim rights and restitutions, and only secondarily claiming a right to hybridity as well in order to confuse stereotyping. It can do useful work within ‘whiteness’ studies to deconstruct such assumptions.
Pacific Hybridity Games

My own entry into the gladiators’ ring of the Hybridity Games has been through the door marked ‘Literature,’ and I have been a back-row player on small teams such as Pacific Writing and Indian Writing in English. I am, however, a white Australian, so there are questions about my own hybridity or essentialised exclusion as well as about the composition/identity of the literatures themselves. Sylvie André, for example, makes the potentially damaging accusation that hybridity is a useful concept to white settler critics, since it allows them to present themselves as becoming indigenised while simultaneously calling into question the authenticity of indigenous peoples who have perforce become, if not racially, then culturally mixed after colonial contact. It is more true, however, if we use the term ‘creole’ (in its sense of socio-culturally localised rather than racially mixed) since white settler peoples who talk about hybridity as a way of belonging in a new land usually do so without at all meaning any biological blending. This is perhaps why, as André points out, indigenous voices are raised against hybridity; they can see that it perpetuates by occlusion a basic racism, even though their own essentialist opposition seems to also perpetuate notions of biological and pre-contact authenticity that disallow the mixedness of globalising modernity affecting all peoples.  

It strikes me that there are phases of development within each national or regional (or sectional, as in Indian English) literature in which hybridity takes different forms and achieves different ends. I do not want to suggest some developmental model here, since in every case instances of the same functional mode of textual hybridity will crop up in quite different overall chronological periods, and in different periods the same textual mode may generate quite different effects. What we need, perhaps, like Spivak’s

20 Nederveen Pieterse, pp.77, 88, 93.
strategic essentialism, is a **strategic hybridity** which answers to the needs of its different users according to their socio-political contexts. As I hope to show, some indigenous voices – here specifically those from Oceania – have been developing strategies all along that allow the continuation of ethnic identity as a partly racial/ised phenomenon while also validating the cultural mixing, both in society and in literature, that contemporary postcolonial life entails. Perhaps in doing so, they offer to everyone in the region a model of syncreticity (rather than hybridity) – a model akin to Claire Harris’s, showing how to be our various selves free of false nostalgias and without encroaching on each other’s ethnic spaces. This surely is the fundamental project of hybridity theory: to undermine the foundations of fundamentalist separatisms – be they racial, religious, linguistic or to do with sexual identity – and to open up equal spaces of mixing that neither assimilate everything into one global melting pot, not deny the right of special recognition to indigenous peoples.

Pacific writing emerged from the 1970s under regimes of nationalist decolonisation and indigenist resurgence within white settler nations. Literary strategies for expressing identity, cultural knowledge and postcolonial experience within the globalising media of English and print in this region often share features with other kinds of postcolonial hybridity, but in fact are not exactly comparable by virtue of responding to quite different dynamics of societal change, media production and cultural politics.

The predominant style of power in Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been linked to opportunistic fluidity. You are a leader (a ‘big man’ rather than a chief) because you have momentary strength of will or body or goods. This will not always be the case, because there is no inherent site of power that produces lasting control. The ‘slippery customer’ may therefore be admired, just as the sly ambush that melts away is at least as acceptable as all-out strategic confrontation. In cultural practice, this fluid quality has been set up as a possible aesthetic for PNG writing. Here, hybridity may not become a resolution of conflict or a site of agonistic struggle so much as a temporary utilitarian appropriation of qualities and objects suited to the situation.

So the hybridity of the symbolic meanings in Vincent Eri’s pioneering novel *The Crocodile* is not any claim on subversion of white ways, although it may have some passing counter-colonial effect. The crocodile as a figure of strength can as easily be applied to a tough patrol office as to a wily native; both are admired. The mixing of mythic consciousness with the mysterious appearance of western goods produces a syncretic ‘cargo cult’

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assemblage that makes sense of a confusing transitional phase of colonialism but fails to satisfy either system of knowledge and is passed over as tribes move into a wider national consciousness and see white men working, trading, dying during World War Two. The central character, Hoiri, takes on white language in order to get on in the new world but it does not help him to cope with traditional knowledge and he is left not as a hybrid figure, so much as one suspended between two incompatible systems waiting for his son to make sense of the new world.  

In a collection of ‘stories of the past by students of today’ from Lae Institute of Technology in 1970 Papua New Guinea, Ishmael Lakate’s tale ‘How the Coconut came into Existence’ tells of a battle between a ghoulish ghost giant (who has a ‘fee fie fo fum’ -ish line in smelling live flesh) and a boy trained in traditional spear fighting. The boy triumphs, the giant falls. ‘At this stage Lumakaka’s soldiers began chasing the boy and throwing spears at him.’ What this bit of diction shift seems to indicate is not merely failure to match word choice to context (‘warrior’ or ‘clansmen’ would have been more consistent with the mythic nature of the pre-contact tale), but a mental code switching from tradition to modernity partly connected to the act to writing and its institutional setting. Similarly, Sam Ulur has a mythic figure not just remove his head in ‘How the Coconut came to Be,’ but unscrew it, ‘astonishing Talia, who hadn’t believed that the head of a man could be unscrewed,’ and astonishing the reader because there is the clear sense that this tale could not have been told in this way unless the writer had seen modern trade goods, notably bottles with screw-top caps. Other renditions of traditional tales turn the usually non-hierarchical PNG characters into handsome Princes and beautiful Princesses, a dog king and queen. ‘The Great Drum of Timpenni’ (a deliberate pun?) by Manoka Nou, tells of a magic drum whose owners, walking through the forest, met a lion. The drum ‘throbbed softly and almost seemed to purr as the wild beast rolled like a playing cat’ and later it draws people to it ‘like a magnet.’ Needless to say, there are no lions, and possibly pre-contact, no cats in PNG; the story suggests some influence from Tutuola-style African tales and exposure to introduced forms of modernity.

27 Stokes, p.15.
28 Stokes, pp.17, 42.
29 Stokes, p.23.
30 Stokes, p.54.
In developing his account of the origin of Ali island and its surrounding language groups, Adam Amod describes a village setting and sets up a context of old people telling children stories at sunset. The ‘Once upon a time’ story recounts a flood myth caused by a magic eel, and opens: ‘One day there was sadness and mourning in the village as the result of the death of the Ayang Natung, the son of the headman.’ The text continues, seamlessly inserting what looks like a typical oral epithet: ‘He was his father’s only hope, his mother’s pride and joy.’ In fact, it is, but it is a straight ‘steal’ from the Australian folksong ‘The Wild Colonial Boy,’ itself a version of an older Irish song. So there is a kind of continuity here effected within a transition from orality to print by a borrowing from an anti-colonial song from the then colonial culture. The story ends with the writer assessing evidence about the difference and origin of local dialects in the tones of a socio-linguistic study, then swings back to its mythic beginnings with a literary touch, naming Ali the ‘Island of Dreams.’

I suppose it could be argued that these texts mark a particular stage of development in the evolution of postcolonial Pacific fiction, but I am not at all sure that this particular style will develop into something more complexly ‘hybrid’ (something akin to Rushdie’s work perhaps). The instances of outside intertextual borrowings for no particular reason other than perhaps to signify the literary nature of the writing or the education of the writer continue into the present. For instance, in the 2000 collection of poetry by Kiribati writer, artist and educator Teweiariki Teaero there is ‘An Ode to Oceania’:

many tiny islands
my dear islands
jewels in the sea
dotting oceania

license my eager hands
to roam
to rove
all over you
to feel you
to peel you
let me see you
let me really see you

let me paint you
with colours of myself
the earthly colours of tapa
and soft pastels of morning

31 Stokes, p.28.
the azure blues of lagoons
and deep greens of mountains….  

This poem, and Teaero’s collection as a whole, demonstrate the now standard form of ‘catalogue verse’ in which the repetition of a key line (‘let me see,’ ‘let me paint,’ ‘let me sing,’ ‘let me dance’) references the chants of oral tradition, while the list of alternative forms of each action within each stanza seem to echo creative writing classes in schools and the ‘epic list’ of chopped-up prose as used to frequent polemical effect by Grace Mera Molisa. But notice the almost random borrowing from John Donne’s ‘To His Mistress’ in which he luxuriates in his lover’s body as his ‘new found land.’ The colonialist discourse seems to have no purchase here, nor is it specifically addressed by the (un-metaphorised) physical and cultural regional geography; it just hangs there as a phrase that many local readers would perhaps not recognise anyway, chosen for its part in the ‘touch’ phases of the list of sensory ways to fully attempt contact with the islands. As a work first read aloud at the Melanesian Cultural Village, Honiara, its double referencing seems merely to point to the syncretic nature of the Pacific writing experience and the doubled local and international audience for this kind of performance and print text.

Now it would seem from Stokes’s collection and its ESL writing class context, that students had been supplied with models of Western fable and fairy tale (and they all had some mission-school and colonial secondary education anyway) and asked to use them as models for retelling traditional myths and legends. What becomes interesting is not that the texts of colonial and overseas power had sufficient influence to induce some clumsy imitation, but that the writers seemed to feel no sense of incongruity in mixing material from different cultural and temporal contexts. There is perhaps a bit of fitting the expression to the context of the writing (Western colonial school-room) in order to ‘give the teacher what you think he or she expects,’ but if this were the governing aspect of the writing, we could expect a more consistent and thorough-going imitation. If there is no shame-faced slyness about throwing in borrowed material, equally (and this is perhaps more surprising given the 1970 date, when a few other writers emerging from the University of Papua New Guinea were becoming politically radicalised) the mixing of codes does not constitute any ‘writing back’ of either an opposition or subversive kind. For this generation of young writers, Queens and Kings had been familiar faces on coinage, in some classrooms, and had been commonly invoked as benign parent figures in speeches by colonial officers from the times of their own parents and grandparents. They are merely appropriating

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the material of their everyday experience, which is itself a free-floating blend of witch-doctors and Princesses, crocodiles and magnets, local creation myths and Australian folklore.

There is no clever deconstructive play in this, but neither is there the postcolonial irony that Linda Hutcheon identifies as a hallmark of the ‘in-between’ postcolonial subversive activist.\textsuperscript{34} There is perhaps an incipient postmodern awareness of ‘quick access to an infinitely recyclable past’ that fast takes on elements of a surface interchange of simulacra,\textsuperscript{35} but it appears to be a natural eclecticism more akin to Michel de Certeau’s tactical play that is free of the self-conscious nostalgia associated with the postmodern. Such consciousness ‘does indeed recall the past, but always with the kind of double vision that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia’s affective power.’\textsuperscript{36} Here it would seem more appropriate to think of ‘bricolage’ in its pre-Barthesian mode, although one would have to object to the colonialist elements of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s attempt to describe the ‘primitive mind’ under this label. For the writers there is no ‘double vision,’ simply a present that is loaded with differences; conflicting meanings are not perceived because there is no awareness of the contradictions beyond the circumstances of the here and now (or at least they are not seen to be relevant to the moment and site of writing).

Here it would seem that the prevailing mode of emergent creativity includes appropriation of colonial and non-indigenous modernity, but it does not entail either outright imitation of the colonial model or subversive ‘abrogation’ of Western culture via deliberate textual hybridising. Hybridity is not a challenge to some metropolitan status quo by rendering texts/identity/culture/nation unheimlich because hybridity is homeliness for some people,\textsuperscript{37} even if it may be an uncomfortable place to inhabit at times; the point is similar to The Empire Writes Back where with its second edition it goes to discussion of globalisation.\textsuperscript{38}

Of course, ‘hybridity’ may not be the apposite term here anyway. None of the writers of the stories cited above, as far as their bio-data indicate, are themselves any other than regular members of indigenous clans and language groups, and the picture of textual and social culture they hint at is not one of

\textsuperscript{34} Linda Hutcheon, ‘Circling the Downspout of Empire’, in Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism, ed. by Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp.167-89.
\textsuperscript{36} Hutcheon, ‘Irony,’ on-line.
\textsuperscript{37} See Bhabha, pp.10-12.
\textsuperscript{38} Ashcroft et al., pp.218-9.
interbreeding such that a new amalgam is created; it is more a case of juxtaposed elements that jostle and kick against each other – neither a melting pot nor a mosaic, nor even a multiculturalism so much as a single social space in which disparate elements cohabit edgily: what I would call ‘syncretism.’ In addition, this condition is itself the local authentic; authenticity is neither singular nor prior, but grounded in local current practice. Up to a point, this supports the theoretical model advanced by \textit{The Empire Writes Back}, in that it is more metonymic than metaphoric in nature and more in keeping with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s definition of linguistic usage as the standard rather than some received code form the colonial centre.\textsuperscript{39} However, the radical agency of this mode of cultural and textual practice is not that it works to abrogate and re-vision some other cultural formation, so much as it consists in the unconcerned assertion of the validity of its own day-to-day experience, independent of either nationalistic resistance models of ‘the Pacific Way’ or a ‘black aesthetic’ on the one hand and subversive anti-colonialist hybridity on the other. The very authenticity of these texts lies in their total lack of interest in responding to anything outside their immediate parameters. The stories are, in fact, an unconsciously gleeful refutation of canonical notions of maturity and classic status (Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot) by virtue of their very ‘provinciality’ – a provinciality that nonetheless takes in elements of the colonial/global and of times beyond the moment of their enunciation. Moreover, the success of this kind of syncretic text inheres precisely in its very unconsciousness that it is provincial for lack of any regard for some external metropolis, spatially or temporally located.

\textbf{Pacific Hybridity}

Pacific literature has its origins in racial and cultural hybridity if we take Florence ‘Johnny’ Frisbie’s work – itself a generic and linguistic hybrid of diary, essay, travelogue, autobiography, and yarn in English and Cook Islands Maori, polished up by the author’s American trader father – as a starting point. The central figure of Patricia Grace’s \textit{Potiki}, for example, is quite likely the offspring of a pakeha drifter and a Maori woman; several of the characters in Albert Wendt’s \textit{Ola} are mixes of white, Samoan, and Maori. Oppositional purity of race and tradition does not continue to feature as a central aspect of Pacific writing beyond an initial period of anti-colonial protest (though in some areas this situation still pertains). Indeed, it is overtly rejected as a determinant of identity and community. The magical child in

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{39} Ashcroft et al., pp.51-9, 62, 72.}
Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People*, for instance, is a foundling, though he does eventually provide the bond between the two protagonists and their extended family. The urban ‘tribe’ in Albert Wendt’s *Black Rainbow*, while individually carrying mixed bloodlines, collectively is a loose group bonded by a common social position and political purpose. Nonetheless, admission of métissage does not do away with a need to assert a fundamental ground for resistance to neo-colonialist inequalities, and in some cases it becomes itself a means of opposing assimilation.40

The habit of interspersing indigenous terms with anglophone text as a means of signalling locality and tradition lasts into contemporary times. To select only three examples, Sia Figiel, Flora Devatine, and Steven Winduo deliberately intersperse English and French with, respectively, demotic Samoan, Reo Ma’ohi, and Papuan lexis.41 In dealing with genre, writers from Oceania not infrequently produce textual mixes that to the outside reader look like lapses of taste, inept slippage across conventions and/or meldings of incompatible noetics. This hybridity, however, in the hands of writers like Wendt (*Black Rainbow*), Hulme (*Te Kaihau*), and John Pule (*The Shark That Ate the Sun/Ko Mago Kai e La*) becomes part and parcel of Pacific writing.42

An interesting cross-over example of syncretic hybridity à la Pacific, is the ‘novel’ by John Kolia, *Close to the Village*.43 Kolia is himself a ‘hybrid’ of a particular kind – a white Australian by birth who took out PNG citizenship and ‘localised’ his surname, living ‘close to’ ordinary residents on the outskirts of Port Moresby rather than amongst the ‘expat’ suburbanites. His adjacency to, rather than interfusion with, PNG people is reflected in the structure of his fiction, which sets up multiple voices with ‘stage directions’ indicative of Kolia’s penchant for radio playscripts and satiric essays on religion and colonial politics. This becomes a ‘hybrid’ genre of fiction as the voices are connected through being responses to a collector of local story. (Kolia ran a unit collecting oral history in the institute of Papua New Guinea Studies for some time and there is a mock anthropological set of genealogies

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at the end of the book.) English is creolised with Motu and Pidgin, and as their various generations and genders cohere into strands of narrative that cut across each other without any evidence of systematic organization (including the varied allusions to literature from Miguel de Cervantes to Rudyard Kipling to Gabriel Okara to Black Power manifestos). It is true that racially, there is a group of miscegenated offspring of the renegade white plantation owner Curoe, his local offsider, Buruka, and the neighbouring villagers, but there is little genuine hybridity overall, as the groups (village, in-between, localised white, colonialist white) coexist as interacting but discrete entities. One character looks forward to the day when all racial difference is erased in a global melting pot of métissage, but the text and its stories do little to foreshadow that outcome, even if it performs a vitality born of complex interactions. Like so many poems and stories in the Pacific, Close to the Village works by adding on more bits. It is the repetitive patterning of several discrete motifs that one finds in tapa design and the ritualistic lists of catalogue verse. In a would-be novel, it becomes tedious and in the end a little pointless without some sense of purposeful control. The only message one is likely to take away is that of a society mired in a meaningless round of booze, brawling and breeding, and an interesting but failed literary experiment. The vision the book seems to want to communicate is that the complex relationships around Deoro plantation (and by extension, in PNG) function to provide a long-term set of checks and balances on excess, but excess is exactly what the text embodies, to the point of incoherence.

Raylene Ramsay makes a useful study of the writing of Kanak poet/essayist/activist Déwé Gorodé, arguing that she works across two cultures in order to assert the validity of her indigenous traditions without being ‘bicéphale’ or ‘entre-deux.’ She produces hybrid fables, part La Fontaine, part Kanak myth, that decentre a western narrative time and voice, that recognise racial mixing and the inroads of Western modernity on local experience, but nonetheless present indigenous culture as somehow surviving apart and as fundamental to life, even to the lives of those complicit in foreign ways. Her work expresses a hybridity that nonetheless insists on its role of asserting difference and is distinct from the hybridised ‘third space’ of Bhabha’s diasporic communities, having no project of dismantling binaries or disseminating across the encounter between coloniser and colonised. Nor is it a space of struggle between two poles, taking on something of the otherness that includes both such as one finds in the ‘interlanguage’ of a

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44 Kolia, p.82.
46 Ramsay, p.138.
This permits the assertion of indigeneity that may eventually produce a reconfiguring of the poles of power themselves. Ramsay makes a brief but pertinent comparison with the poetry of Vanuatu activist Grace Mera Molisa.

A book that looks like the free-floating mix of styles and voices in Close to the Village is Witi Ihimaera’s The Matriarch. Its author seems also to share the marginal hybrid persona of Kolia, but in fact the situation is quite different. While one writer seeks to indigenise himself into, or at least alongside of Papuan life from a white colonial background, Ihimaera worked his way from the Post Office to New Zealand Consul in New York and Washington while never being anything other than a Maori with clear affiliations to his ancestral place, people, and local history. Both novels indulge in a good deal of didactic essay writing, and both appear to be open-ended, but Ihimaera cannot afford the endless inconsequentiality of Kolia’s book.

The Matriarch might be read as reflecting its author’s own ‘hybrid’ mix of tradition with modernity, Maori ethnicity with predominantly Pakeha nationality, New Zealand nationality with global acculturation. It is certainly a ‘hybrid’ text, in so far as it brings together Maori oratorical style (1-6), letters, parliamentary transcripts (315-29) and press reports (174, 183), staged debates, dramatised scenes from history, religious incantations (134-7, 152-7), highly coloured moments of the visionary or fantastic – critics invoke Star Wars or The Raiders of the Lost Ark as comparisons (109, 112-5, 442-6), blocks of Maori language (193, 216), the nineteenth-century family saga novel, and polemical commentary directly addressed to ‘you Pakeha’ (74, 174). Maori creation myth sits beside allusions to Renaissance Europe intrigue and specific details of New Zealand’s Land Wars are likened to Garibaldi’s Risorgimento Italy via a consistent line of operatic citations from Verdi (45, 78, 121 and so on).

The hybridity of the work, however, is not the same as that commonly discussed in relation to Black British writing or the Caribbean (to take only two instances). There is no suggestion of a ‘creole continuum’ or some ultimate ‘homecoming’ through acceptance of métissage as a comforting

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47 Ramsay, pp.146-7.
48 Ramsay, p.148.
51 Calder, p.82.
norm. The implication throughout is of unfinished business and fundamentally unresolvable difference. It is true that hybridity of various kinds can be seen in the book: Wi Pere, the politician who proposed in 1909 to drive the Pakeha into the sea, was half Pakeha himself (27, 32-5); the Ratana religion founded by prophet Te Kooti Rikirangi is a mix of Old Testament narrative and Maori belief structures, just as his ‘cathedral’ Rongopai becomes a hybrid ‘translation’ of art-forms and conventions in order to preserve and honour ancestral legacies (190-4). The narrator is married to a Pakeha (123, 217). The matriarch of the book’s title carries high chief status through her genealogy and teaches her grandson Maori creation chants, the lore of land boundaries and the art of taiaha fighting (130-2). But she is an anomalous figure, firstly for being a woman, and secondly for bolstering her mystique by adopting aspects of ‘white’ culture to confound both Maori and Pakeha alike: she drives a Lagonda, sings Italian opera, rides to hounds, roller-skates, and is skilled at fencing (22, 64). Her personality too, does not exhibit the kind of ‘organic unity’ prized by some critics of the novel genre, swinging between cruel imperiousness and loving indulgence. It is this unstable mix that the narrator, her favoured grandson, attempts to understand during the course of the book.

At one point, the protagonist notes how he and his wife talk past each other until eventually the sense of a gestalt (including the silences and the unspoken nuances) generates enough understanding to move on to the next scene of inter-action (124-5). This mode of operation is enacted in the text itself, which shuttles to and fro from the present of the narration, to the 1860s of Te Kooti’s ‘retribution,’ to the Matriarch’s history of the 1920s, the story of her son’s marriage from 1943, the Matriarch’s fight against male tradition and white government 1947-50, to the resurgence of Maori political action centred on the Land March of 1975. The narrator endeavours to make sense of all this, but the text itself offers mainly a bricolage of scenes that do not comfortably cohere into even an edgy hybrid meld. Both the outspoken challenge to ‘you Pakeha’ repeating through the book and the discomforting exposé of factional hostility and gender inequity within Maori society provide no easy ‘contract’ between writer and any group of readers. Moreover, some scenes make evident the incompatible juxtaposition of knowledge systems. A clear example is the appearance of a taniwha water monster (340, 437-9), apparently recorded in both Maori oral tradition and Pakeha press reports, but unassimilable into historical fact, just as the prophetic ritual ‘chanting’ in Old Testament language of the story of prophet Te Kooti cannot be made to ‘dialogue’ in any kind of harmonious relationship with the white historical accounts of his times. In fact, the text
itself asks questions about the nature and ownership of history when it appears to plagiarise from standard histories of New Zealand.53

What we seem to have here is syncretic counterpoint rather than anything usefully understood in terms of hybridity. (Nor is this ‘on edge’ set of juxtaposed complexities the kind of ironic postcolonial writing that Hutcheon talks about either; it is far too engaged to indulge in wry even-handed overviews.) This must be the case because despite the various mixings of race and culture depicted, the underlying message is one of fundamental difference grounded in essential belonging to place and identity. A key scene in the novel is when the Matriarch insists on being heard at a marae gathering with the Prime Minister in Wellington. Artemis is saved from spiritual attack and social humiliation by her grandson who repeats the creation chant she has taught him but in a context that declares it as a genealogy linking him and her not merely to the foundational Takitimu canoe, but to the gods it brought to Aotearoa (74-8, 90-5, 111-7). Ihimaera states that:

As a Maori, I don’t actually believe that there is any difference between what is history, what is reality and what is fantasy. As far as I’m concerned, the whole world is imbued with and energized by legend, by a sense of spirituality and other-worldliness; it’s something that I believe in.54

What makes The Matriarch a difficult read for the rationalist Westerner is precisely that there is no irony, no postmodern ambivalence of knowing self-parody, in the presentation of the ‘magical’ scenes that sit amongst official print texts situated so that we see their limitations. There is a meta-level to the narration at times:

Oh, Major Reginald Newton Biggs, I wish to give you a lyrical and rhapsodic interlude, something to balance the cruel reality of death, the smashing of your head to pulp during the dawn of the tenth of November. Let me conjure up a family picnic, yes, by the banks of the Waipaoa River. (144)

Again, at the start of Act Four, the narrator apologises to Wi Pere for delaying his part of the story (301). But this is more of a challenge to readers to judge the contending and contradictory accounts set before them than it is a fictive safety-valve to let us sit back and merely enjoy the story. The novel is about partisan interests and is itself a partisan work in the service of Maori sovereignty55 – even if it shows how richly and messily complex Maori society is. The syncretism here is in no way a hybrid amalgam/fusion such as modernist texts offer, but it is a ‘thick’ assemblage of jostling pieces that is

53 Williams, pp.128-9, 133-7.
54 Sarti, p.72.
55 Sarti, p.72.
more than the superficial bricolage of postmodernity. There is no comforting blend to anticipate, nor can we walk away from the clash of personalities, stories, and textual modes, but there is a deep-seated single-mindedness about the book: ‘What we have to do is ensure that there is always a Maori way of looking at things.’\textsuperscript{56} If there is a connection here to the hybridity of the ‘creole continuum,’ it is to the work of Kamau Brathwaite, where he anchors the mixings of Caribbean culture and identity on radical Third World politics and a foundational basis of African origins.

**Conclusion**

My reading is in accordance with Laura E. Donaldson’s article on North American First Nations’ adaptations of Christianity in which she deploys hybridity theory to show how adoption of white ways does not necessarily mean an assimilation that can be used to disallow indigenous claims to authenticity and land. Donaldson aligns herself with Nicholas Thomas and Gauri Viswanathan in thinking of cultural change as ‘[e]ntanglement – or rather “interweaving and disentanglement”’\textsuperscript{57} as a way of admitting native agency and local political agendas. We see something of this in the twin strands of Wi Pere and Te Kooti in *The Matriarch* – politician and guerrilla prophet at tactical odds but jointly working strategically to reclaim lands lost to white settlers and the colonial government. Donaldson goes on to work with Elaine Orr’s metaphors of negotiation, ‘grafting, welding, annexing, bridging, sifting’,\textsuperscript{58} rejecting syncretism in its sense of absorbing differences into one organic system in order to privilege a more conflictual unironic struggle termed ‘retraditionalization’ by Rayna Green.\textsuperscript{59} I accept the relevance of this figure to indigenous processes of adaptation, though Ihimaera points out that while Te Kooti ‘retraditionalises’ Pakeha religion and warfare, his memorial house Rongopai also ‘remodernises’ Maori tradition (190-3),\textsuperscript{60} as Artemis also modernises the role of women within Maoritanga.

Hybridity theory can only follow on from the familiarity and fragile tolerance arising from interpersonal and intercultural contacts. (Nederveen Pieterse notes that in Bosnia, the place of the highest rate of inter-ethnic marriage saw the least conflict and that of least contact was where violence

\textsuperscript{56} Sarti, p.74.
\textsuperscript{58} Donaldson, p.184.
\textsuperscript{59} Donaldson, pp.194-5.
\textsuperscript{60} Calder, p.84.
began.\textsuperscript{61}) Those contacts are not easy ones, however, and may not, even with inter-marriage, lead to harmonious amalgams of cultural practice. The redemptive qualities of hybridity exist, but they do not inhere in the concept itself, nor only or primarily in cultural and literary critical play. It is true that such cultural play can reach out positively to alter attitudes, but there needs to be a social ground from which its effects can grow and which they can sustain. This ground is, as the works cited demonstrate, always a messy zone of ongoing struggle. On this terrain, there will be tactical moves amongst different aspects of hybridity and essentialism according to the needs of the situation and the people involved. The work of the critic is not to set up a single theory but to attend to the workings and shape-shiftings of metaphors deployed to make sense of the multiplicities of contemporary life. To cite Pnina Werbner:

What is needed is a \textit{processual} theory of hybridity, one that goes beyond the recognition of monological discourses that are in permanent tension with a ‘sea of heteroglossia’. Such a theory must differentiate, in the first instance, between a politics that proceeds from the legitimacy of difference […] and a politics that rests on coercive unity, ideologically grounded in a single monolithic truth. Second, it must explain how and why cultural hybrids are still able to disturb and ‘shock’ […] in a postmodern world that celebrates difference through a consumer market that offers a seemingly endless choice of ‘unique’ subcultures and styles.\textsuperscript{62}

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From Nostalgia to Postalgia: Hybridity and Its Discontents in the Work of Paul Gilroy and the Wachowski Brothers

Andrew Blake

Abstract

Paul Gilroy proposes that we imagine a post-racist world both through political discourses outlined in the 1930s-60s by a very small group of intellectuals, and contemporary popular culture. The melancholic mood of parts of the UK derives from a refusal to face the loss of the Empire which had structured its political institutions and culture alike. However, ordinary peoples’ everyday production of the hybrid new is able to celebrate life in a post-post-colonial society. But Gilroy cannot put his faith in a popular culture which includes ‘hip-hop consumer culture’ and other American horrors. This article asks whether we can afford to simply write off all US popular culture? I take The Matrix for example. In all its forms – movies, comics, video games – this is a complex cultural text whose meanings are actively being changed from a worldwide online community with no obvious adherence to race or nation. This community might exemplify the cosmopolitan politics desired by Gilroy, and open to many through electronic communication.

Paul Gilroy and Post-Imperial Melancholia

A summary of Paul Gilroy’s work so far might be something like this: the concept of ‘race’ was produced out of slavery and empire; it is still important within current political discourse, and it can only produce racisms; so therefore we have to propose, and to imagine, a post-racist world through both political discourse and non-political popular culture. Any policy or theory of culture which produces or promotes irreducible ethnic difference tends to the racist. While this means that there is still a great deal of racism in popular culture, only ordinary peoples’ continual, everyday, production of the hybrid new is able to resist such poison and acknowledge the multilayered complexity of life in a post-post-colonial, and for many of its citizens post-racist, society. Gilroy emphasises the production out of this everyday mixing of cultural artefacts which in complex, aware, and self-ironising ways, tend to celebrate the new world he thinks is possible.

Paul Gilroy’s key publications include There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, and Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of ‘Race’ (published in the USA as
Against Race). This latter dismisses the notion of ‘race’ as a Victorian pseudoscience that has poisoned our thought, and also attacks the ‘cheap pseudo-solidarities’ offered by ethnic loyalty. Gilroy discredits what he calls ‘race-thinking’ or ‘ethnic absolutism,’ with their tendencies toward authoritarianism exemplified in the careers of Marcus Garvey or Slobodan Milosevic. Gilroy questions what he sees as the quasi-racisms of the multiple-monoculture ‘multiculturalism’ which has been promoted in the UK and elsewhere as an anti-racist strategy since the 1970s.

Against this, Gilroy deploys the experience of diaspora as the generator of a different kind of culture. As explored most fully in The Black Atlantic (which is about the crisscrossing cultural traffic, connecting Africa, the Caribbean, America, and Britain and Europe, consequent from the slave trade), diasporic identity is differentiated from (chosen) exile or migration. Yet as traumatic as the Middle Passage was, Gilroy values the end result: a ‘dual consciousness’ that comes from neither being fully assimilated to the new culture nor able to fully preserve the culture of origin. Because of this, diasporic peoples always, and unavoidably, transform the cultures they have been made to enter. So his principal example of positive hybridity is actually the legacy of the imperial power he attacks in the recent book, titled After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture in the UK, and Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia in the USA.

After Empire is in two parts. The first describes a global strategy for imagining a non-racist humanism; the second examines aspects of official and popular culture in the UK which both question and echo the aims of the global project. Firstly, then, to recover a positive global consciousness, Gilroy would have us return to ‘the cosmopolitan hopes of a generation that, like George Orwell himself, in rejecting both Fascism and Stalinism, articulated larger loyalties: to humanity and to civilization.’ This is the generation of modernist intellectuals from Sigmund Freud and W. E. B. Du Bois, through Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre and George Orwell, to Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X. In focusing on these people, and the ways in which they positioned themselves as outside the routine discourses of the nation state, Gilroy neatly sidesteps the self-referential theorising of ‘hybridity’ by the leading postcolonial scholars and their acolytes. After Empire is not, therefore, in any direct sense an engagement with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Robert J. C. Young and others, despite

3 Gilroy, After, p.27.
the positive spin on ‘hybridity’ which might be available in interpreting their work. *It is an alternative to it.*

Following Fanon and others, then, Gilroy wants to ‘purge and redeem’ Enlightenment humanism of its dark side (imperialism and racism) and to renovate the idea of a species-level solidarity that transcends racial divisions. Gilroy suggests that these modernist intellectuals revealed the centrality of racism to modern politics, and that they also laid the ground for a cosmopolitan global democracy that could succeed colonialism. But that project was cut short by the rise of culturalist theories of race that replaced the biological racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with something Gilroy finds equally problematic. ‘Civilisations are now closed or finished cultures that need to be preserved.’

This type of argument leads to the right-wing articulation of a ‘clash of civilisations’; but also to the left-wing insistence on absolute differences among the adherents of cultures that in Gilroy’s eyes renders contemporary anti-racism ineffective, and even counter-productive. These are the ‘cheap appeals to absolute national and ethnic difference that are currently fashionable,’ invoked by apologists for the war on terror and defenders of identity politics – each the celebrants of ‘difference’ – alike.

In all these discussions of intellectuals and race the key target remains for Gilroy not global capital but the policies and official discourses of the State. Articulating knowledge/power through ideas of difference which have been recently reinforced through culturalist views of the ‘clash of civilisations,’ the nation state now looks less vulnerable than it did before 9/11 to the neoliberal globalisation fantasy of a world with no political boundaries in the way of the accumulation of capital. These views, and the articulation of State power which deploys them, have deep roots in colonial history: ‘Raciology is a result of modern political culture, with special ties to its philosophies of power, government, and statecraft.’ European colonialism began to globalise the power/knowledge of the State. Moreover metropolitan statecraft and imperial governance informed each other, the periphery serving as ‘a laboratory, a location for experiment and innovation that transformed the exercise of governmental powers at home and configured the institutionalization of imperial knowledge to which the idea of “race” was central.’ Public torture, for instance, did not disappear but migrated to the colonies, as is evident from the brutal suppression of the 1857 Indian mutiny – an argument echoed in recent claims about the export of torture from the

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7 Gilroy, *After*, p.46.
USA to client countries. Indeed, today’s US-led ‘war on terror,’ with its absolute demarcation of difference, its suspension of legality and human rights and export of torture, can only be understood in terms of its continuities with colonial governance. The demonisation of Arabs as ‘towel-heads’ is clear enough as an example of the way in which this legacy is taken up once again in popular culture; on the other hand the acts of those prepared to serve as ‘human shields’ in places like Gaza is a sign that a different emphasis, a humanist cosmopolitanism worlds away from the dogmas of ‘identity politics’ and state power, is possible.

Turning away from the global, and looking at the present conditions of politics and culture in the UK, the second part of the book offers firstly a critique of melancholia. This is melancholia of the type examined in Alexander and Margarete Mitserlisch’s work, in the aftermath of the Second World War, with Germans trying to come to terms with their love for Adolf Hitler, the narcissism he had proposed in propounding the mastery of the Aryan race, and the terrible consequences of those feelings. For Gilroy, British attitudes to race and to global politics alike are conditioned by the ambivalence of ‘postcolonial melancholia’ on the one hand, and by an emergent ‘unkempt, unruly and unplanned multiculture’ on the other. The melancholic mood of parts of the country derives from a refusal to face up to the loss of the Empire which had structured its political institutions and culture alike. Rather than working through this loss, acknowledging its horrors and the shameful feelings this would produce, and letting go, Britain acts it out in the continuing popular media and official attitudes to immigration, at worst in continuing racist violence. The melancholia comes from the partial recognition of these injustices, combining nostalgia with residual guilt but also a sense that the (white) British themselves – and not black Britons, or the developing nations – are somehow now ‘victims’ of their colonising past.

Gilroy also, however, detects a set of feelings which are far from melancholic, a ‘spontaneous tolerance and openness evident in the underworld of Britain’s convivial culture.’ If, he argues, we identify, acknowledge, teach and learn the central role that colonialism and race thinking played in the constitution of the modern state, and if we promote and celebrate the countervailing trend towards a culture of conviviality, Britain might be able to avoid ‘US models that are identified with an inevitable future of racial conflict.’ Indeed, the ‘rebirth of English tolerance and

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8 Gilroy, *After*, p.x.
generosity’ might even ‘one day teach the rest of Europe something about what will have to be done in order to live peacefully with difference.’

This argument involves a sense that both Englishness and Britishness, as they are currently constructed within political, academic, and popular discourses alike, are still open to the privileging of whiteness, the denial of racism, and the racist demonising of perceived others, including both well-established and recent immigrant communities. The new racism is immanent within the melancholia. Gilroy’s assertions are pertinent to the UK Government’s responses to public concern over asylum and immigration. These include the development of an American-style citizenship test, which will involve the teaching and learning of official, public knowledges such as history, to those who would be Brits.

One target of Gilroy’s ire, therefore, is what might be called the new popular imperial history, which he sees as a project designed to rehabilitate the story of the British Empire in such a way as to occlude its responsibilities for white British racism and the systematic oppression of colonised peoples, and to present it as of benefit to the world, including those former colonised nations. This is seen most clearly in the work of the self-entrepreneurial and acknowledged conservative Niall Ferguson who also, though with a very different political emphasis, acknowledges the continuity between old British and new American Empires, but also according to Gilroy, and perhaps more surprisingly, in the work of Linda Colley. These accounts are read as producing a (white) nostalgia for the lost British Empire, but one which is characterised not – even in Ferguson – by simplistic celebration, but more precisely by the quasi-pathological state of melancholia, of confused regret for loss rather than genuine mourning, let alone apologia or reparation for horrors past.

Having established the continuance of such regressive tendencies, however, Gilroy offers a very qualified hope for the future in the mixing of everyday folk, which he sees as producing a post-post-colonial hybridity which cannot be reduced either to melancholic nostalgia for lost power, or to the insistence on difference which fetishises ethnically-based so-called ‘communities.’ This everyday hybridity involves the availability of food, dress and music from everywhere and to anyone, and contribute to the making of new cultural artefacts such as Balti curries – ‘Indian’ foods which were invented in Birmingham – or the drum’n’bass music which evolved in the ethnically mixed poor neighbourhoods of mid-1990s east London from a

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mix of sources such as (Jamaican) dub and (local white) hardcore techno musics. Perhaps most importantly – a point underplayed by Gilroy – it involves the sexual and parenting mixing of people from different ethnic backgrounds. It is often claimed that 1 in 4 of all children born in London is of ‘mixed-race’ parentage; and that this is one of the key modes of difference between the UK and the USA.\(^\text{13}\)

To back up the celebration of the emergence of a counter-nostalgia
culture, Gilroy puts his hope in ‘a “vulgar” or “demotic” cosmopolitanism’
whose value lies ‘in its refusal of state-centeredness and in its attractive
vernacular style.’\(^\text{14}\) Gilroy analyzes a series of contemporary British cultural
phenomena, from the ambivalent nationalism of football terrace chants,
through the anxious masculinities represented in novels by Nick Hornby or
Tony Parsons, to the complex ways in which the BBC pseudo-reality sitcom
*The Office* deals with race. While England football fans seem to acknowledge
despite themselves that the country’s perpetually indifferent sporting
achievement in the game their Victorian ancestors gave to the world is indeed
a melancholic substitute for lost geopolitical importance,\(^\text{15}\) in many aspects of
popular culture there is hope for a future beyond well beyond these limits.
Even feelgood reality television shows *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force*
harbour utopian potential, dealing routinely and without comment with
people of all ethnic backgrounds;\(^\text{16}\) but their melancholic sorrow – as with the
Parsons and Hornby novels – lies in the fatalistic assumption that such
change can only be effected within the self, or the home. No positive vision
of the public sphere is available: they acknowledge political powerlessness.
More positively still, Gilroy celebrates the work of the comedian Sacha
Baron Cohen, as the ethnically confused/confusing Ali G; and the musings of
Mike Skinner, the mockney/Brummie white rapper of *The Streets.* In each
case the kind of melancholic whiteness he thinks is being reproduced and
defended in Ferguson’s histories, and in Harry Potter’s adventures (as he sees
them) for that matter, would appear to be either vulnerable or actually
impossible, among urban metropolitan youth.\(^\text{17}\) It adds up to a culture which

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/race/story/0,,605340,00.html>.

\(^\text{14}\) Gilroy, *After*, p.67. I owe this insight to Jon Beasley-Murray, University of British Columbia,
whose on-line review of Gilroy’s *Melancholia* inspired many of my own thoughts in this
discussion.

\(^\text{15}\) Cf. John King’s novels, such as *Football Factory* (1997; dir. Nick Love, Momentum [2003])
and *England Away* (1999), which represent just this melancholia, absolutely and relentlessly, as
an aspect of the psyche of the English ‘football hooligan.’

\(^\text{16}\) Gilroy, *After*, pp.130-1.

\(^\text{17}\) My own view is that beneath the postmodern veneer of the reinvented school story, J. K.
Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books deal very seriously, if problematically, with precisely the residual
is at least potentially, as the title of an album by third generation British Asian musician Nitin Sawhney puts it, ‘beyond skin.’

It is worth mentioning, and where possible reflecting on, a few of the questions raised by this analysis. Firstly, given that the continual production of hybridity might eventually lead to the erosion of all difference and the creation of a fully shared global culture, is that erosion of difference what we want? Could it not be seen as globalisation from below, and in its erasure of differences just as negative as McDonaldisation?

Perhaps the biggest problem with Gilroy’s optimism, from a UK point of view, is actually the reverse of this point, as he partly acknowledges when discussing Englishness: that his hybridity will not be universal, but will only happen in the larger metropolitan areas. His London is not where I live (in the ethnically mainly white South-East). Though the cultural artefacts made in London reach from there to here, their interpretation should not be taken for granted. As it is the argument about the blending of new cultures through the everyday mixing of the world’s peoples seems to make far stronger connections between London and New York than with London and York, say; the differences are between a quotidian metropolitan hybridity and an equally quotidian non-metropolitan world in which hybridity is resisted by media and popular culture alike. There seems to be in early twentieth-century UK a post-multicultural hybridised London, some other big cities such as Manchester which would like to be like London but are not, and everywhere else there is relatively monocultural-white domination interrupted (in landscape terms at least) by occasional, equally monocultural black or brown ghettos, such as the parts of Yorkshire where the 7/7 bombers lived, or the North-Western former mill towns which saw riots involving local ‘Asian’ youths in the early 2000s.

Secondly, we have to ask, is even the book’s celebration of the undermining of cultural difference in metropolitan areas still relevant? The book was written post-9/11 and 11/7 but pre-7/7, and there is comparatively little discussion of populist concerns with Islam and non-assimilation, or of Islamic assertionism and/or fundamentalism, and/or the ways in which this, arguably the most problematic aspect of British (multi)culture right now, has either a) proved the suspicions of popular racism, even 1960s politician Enoch Powell’s predictions of mass immigration necessarily leading to eventual confrontation, to be ‘true’; and b) been represented within the kinds of cultural artefacts he discusses so positively.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} See Gilroy, \textit{After}, pp.133-5.
To my mind, any account of a post-post-colonial future in the UK, or anywhere else in the Western world for that matter, must, while detailing the emergence and practices of racism in the West, somehow also confront this particular regressive modernism: of the local adherents to the global idea of a would-be-Caliphate. In order to do so firstly they will have to think of it as part of everyday life. In this regard we might mention some recent fictional engagements with Islamic radicalisms. We might, further, arrange these in a specific chronology. Post-The Satanic Verses affair, there is Hanif Kureishi’s novel The Black Album, and his short story and film My Son the Fanatic; On the cusp of 9/11, we have Zadie Smith’s novel (subsequently televised) White Teeth (and, peripherally Salman Rushdie’s New York novel Fury). Post-9/11, there’s Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane, and the BBC3 animation series Monkey Dust.

All these texts represent some aspects of metropolitan hybridity positively, just as Gilroy does; yet all of them represent politicised Islamic fundamentalism within immigrant cultures; all of them see these forms of local (or perhaps that should be glocal) Islam as tending to hatred for its Others and anti-personnel violence; all represent the rage of the culturally and ideologically marginalised young Moslem male as dangerous to everyone else, as conducive to terrorism, and as an utterly ordinary aspect of everyday life in contemporary Britain.

We have to do more than just register this. In that, again, it tends to the comedic, all this fiction (perhaps except Monkey Dust) can be read as utopian. In this regard we might remember what Smith said in reflecting on the role of the novelist in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks: this kind of fiction, its celebration, is now impossible. Because, she implied, echoing Theodor Adorno’s view that there could be no poetry after the Holocaust, a comic view of society (including the organised, alienated, internal Muslim threat) was subsequently impossible to view through the lens of fiction. Not so; consider one of the most sophisticated responses, the running gag (an incrementally repeated sketch) from Monkey Dust. This involves Shafiq and Abdul, two young men from the West Midlands who have local accents, eat their mum’s home cooking and/or fast food, and avidly watch downmarket British television. They promise their mentor, the turbaned, bearded and Arabic-accented Omar, that they will take part in the jihad – but only after,

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19 It is notable that British Asian writer Meera Syal’s work, such as her novels Anita and Me (1997) and Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee (2000), does not do this. In a way her texts are part of the general ironising which can be read as post-multicultural. But in another, they simply do not represent ‘the Muslim problem’ beyond the odd joke about the unacceptability of marriage between, say, Hindus and Moslems: here, the rage of Islam is not ordinary.

say, watching the coming week’s FA Cup replay involving their soccer team, West Bromwich Albion.

All these texts, and much of the response to the London attacks of 7/7/2005, map fairly precisely onto Gilroy’s grid of state power/knowledge, official-public melancholia and popular humour. Rather than US-style patriotism or Spanish-style protest, London’s tube and bus bombings inspired, yes, State efforts to control freedom; yes, anguished-melancholic analyses of British-born ‘bombers from suburbia’ in the media which seemed to express disbelief in their possibility, let alone immanence; and yes, also a number of self-mocking responses such as the website <http://www.iamfuckingterrified.com/> which are closer to the laconic and inclusive humour of The Streets than any official discourse, let alone the perversely anti-democratic laws which the British Government has attempted to enact since the 7/7 attacks.

It is easy to see even in this example that bottom-up popular culture is closer to Gilroy’s hybrid utopia than to the world imagined by Ferguson, or Tony Blair for that matter: and to conclude that a post-post-colonial version of the Blitz mentality will attempt to make Britain – its Muslim population included – a better world even if we Brits are all in fact living on Airstrip One. In the end, though, Gilroy cannot fully put his faith in the ‘small triumphs’ that he finds in contemporary popular culture. A hybridised and self-ironising anti-nostalgia, however inclusive it is of difference, is unlikely to save the world not just from melancholia and its residual racisms, but from the dominant American cultural imperialism. It is fare more likely, he claims, that a generation could be misled by ‘hip-hop consumer culture’ and other ‘stultifying US styles and habits.’

Aha. Lurking behind much of Gilroy’s writing in this book, in each section, is a growing anti-Americanism. Globalization and corporate-sponsored multiculturalism (that is, images of black beauty in advertising, fashion, and sports) are contributing to the erosion of race-thinking, Gilroy concedes; but he also accuses global capital’s image manipulation of an apolitical promiscuity which seems to offer only a ‘pastiche of multiculture that is manipulated from above by commerce.’

Possibly true. But – should we, can we afford to simply write off all US popular culture in this way – especially given its global influence? I cannot think of a British engagement with present or future, global power and opposition thereto with the global reach of The Matrix, and I am not convinced that these texts, which taken together are the most complex popular cultural artefact since the Magic Flute, are merely a manipulated ‘pastiche of multiculture.’

21 Gilroy, After, p.147.
22 Gilroy, After, p.163.
Gilroy’s, they can be read as offering a utopian cultural hybridity. Let’s have a look.

**The Matrix Phenomenon: Postalgia, or, towards a Hyphenated Hybridity**

In the first movie, *The Matrix*, directed and written by Larry and Andy Wachowski and released in 1999, the message seems all too obvious, and all too humanist. At some point in the future, people have been defeated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) computer-based machines, which use the humans’ bodies to produce energy while feeding their minds on the Matrix, a computer-generated representation of life in about 1999. Agents of the machines, all represented as white males dressed FBI-style in black suits and ties, attempt to clear up problems in the Matrix by ensuring the control of any organised human resistance (and also, it later turns out, any out of control computer programmes). In what would usually be read as a fairly routine embodiment of Hollywood anti-corporate Americanism, the white agents (bad) confront three people (good), who seem to represent a hybrid alternative: Morpheus, a black male; Neo, a mixed-race (father Chinese-Hawaiian, mother English) male, and Trinity, a white female. The humans defeat the Agents’ pro team, while operating from a somewhat cyberpunk ‘real world’ (outside the Matrix) which is an obviously multiethnic and relatively gender-equal environment.

Whatever the complications which the subsequent movies make to the basic plot outline (and they are legion), no black demon emerges to spoil the ‘white power versus multicultural resistance’ aspect of the story. Subsequent authority figures within the machine world, AI programmes such as the Architect and the Merovingian, are represented as white males, while helpful oppositional programme the Oracle appears to be African-American and her guardian programme to be Chinese. The films represent the illusionary world of the late twentieth century as a white-male-dominated and apparently more or less whites-only world, even in the bondage party in the first movie, whereas the heart of the ‘real world’ is Zion, a multiracial and (in a few, relatively underdeveloped images) apparently also multicultural underground city, represented most fully through the rave-type dance event in the second

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23 C. Richard King and David J. Leonard push the line that the texts are racist in their ‘Is Neo White? Reading Race, Watching the Trilogy’, in *Jacking In to the Matrix Franchise: Cultural Reception and Interpretation*, ed. by Matthew Kapell and William G. Doty (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.31-44. Confusingly, Neo is described as multicultural – by which they mean of racially mixed parentage (p.37), but as both mixed and ‘passing for white’ (p.40).
movie, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), in which bodies of various colours dance promiscuously and joyously affirm their common humanity.

But there is more to the hybridity on offer here than the skin colour of the actors, or even of the cities and communities they are allocated to:

1. Compared with the Hollywood norm, there is a genuinely hybrid music soundtrack. Don Davis’s score, modernist classical music offset by minimalism and played by a big Western orchestra, is punctuated at appropriate moments by Anglo-American indie, rock, dance, and metal. While two soundtrack CDs were released after the first film (one with the Davis score, the other with everything else and a few more rock tracks ‘inspired by’ the movie, as per the Hollywood norm of the time) the soundtrack CDs for the second and third movies provide a hybrid of dance/classical tracks. Some of Davis’s work is remixed or recomposed by trance/ambient band Juno Reactor – which includes several South African musicians, though its leading figure is Brighton-based British composer Ben Watkins, who is credited with the composition of ‘additional music’ on the third movie in the trilogy, *Matrix Revolutions* (also 2003). So, sonically, the authoritative mode of representation is not merely replaced by popular music as a different form of hegemony, still located within globalising American capitalism (as in *American Graffiti*, say) but is increasingly blended with it to form something else. The final track of the *Matrix Revolutions* CD is the closing credits music to the movie, ‘Navras,’ Watkins’s recomposition of Don Davis’s music for the climactic fight between Neo and Agent Smith. This recomposed version features electronic dance beats, orchestra, and four Indian musicians, as well as a choir singing in Sanskrit from the Hindu sacred text the Upanishads. 24 This track even has its own fanlisting website at <www.navras.boourns.net>.

2. Compared with the Hollywood norm, we seem to have not the exploitation of other cultural norms in film-making, but what might be called a respectful Orientalism. The use of Hong Kong movie fight choreographer Yuen Wo Ping and his associates is one aspect of this, as is the normalisation (*not*, precisely, exoticisation) of martial arts as part of Neo’s education.

3. There is *no* Hollywood norm I am aware of for the ways in which the films deal with religious and philosophical themes; Hinduism, Buddhism (especially Zen) and Christianity are present in the mix from the start, alongside ideas in western philosophy from Plato’s cave to Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra.

4. Hybridity in a more complex sense is offered as the trilogy develops. The eventual ‘defeat’ of the machines is somewhat ambivalently implied in

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24 The sleeve notes for the soundtrack CD *Matrix Revolutions* credit *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 1.3.28.
the first movie, but by the end of the final film, just as the classical orchestra
has fused with techno, Neo has achieved some kind of physical union with
the machines. By this time it is clear that the machines, which before the wars
had been imbued not just with AI but with some form of uncorrupted human
spirit, have developed their own culture which would seem to be the
intellectual source of the light necessary for the world ever since the humans
blocked sunlight from the skies (though that leaves open the problem of the
role of, and indeed what is going to happen about, the remaining human
batteries, after Neo’s moment of union apparently heals the world). Here is,
apparently, a ‘humanism beyond skin’ of the type advocated by Gilroy (and
with much enthusiasm, from within the movies’ DVD-extra commentaries,
by the African-American scholar Cornel West, who also has a role in the
films themselves).

5. The films are only part of a new kind of textual hybridity. *The Matrix*
has generated, and can be read as part of, a multi-level text in which
adventure and quest story confront philosophical, political, ethical, and
scientific issues. There is the *Ultimate Matrix* multi-DVD set, complete with
commentaries on the films by philosophers and scientists. There are the
*Animatrix* short animated films; a number of comic books and graphic
novels; *Enter the Matrix*, an orthodox computer game, and the *Matrix Online*
computer game developed for massively-multi-player use by the film’s
inceptors and including specially-shot film; there is
<www.whatisthematrix.com>, probably the best official website associated
with a mainstream movie (almost certainly the only one with a philosophy
section). All this is backed up by innumerable fan websites and a growing
secondary literature which goes beyond fan books and film studies and into
political, philosophical, and religious speculation.\(^25\) What is at stake here,
what is being made to happen here, is the hybridising of popular and official
knowledges, and of our modes of access to them, an attempt to render
speculation on big issues a more normal part of contemporary culture.

On the other hand, or just to add to the complexity, we have to
acknowledge that this group of texts and responses is riven with interesting
problems:

A. Morpheus is a very ambivalent character. His name, his dress, and his
mirrorshades may represent examples of comic-book black cool, but what are
we to make of the opening sequence in which Morpheus is represented as a
terrorist? And of his dogmatic and extreme religious beliefs in Neo as

\(^{25}\) See Kapell and Doty; *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. by
William Irwin (Peru: Carus, 2004). *Exploring the Matrix: New Writings on the Matrix and the
complementary perspectives by a number of science fiction writers, sadly only to the first movie.
Saviour, which are represented as such in the second and third movies? Both
may be a part of the texts’ routine incorporation of what I have referred to as
Hollywood anti-Americanism,\textsuperscript{26} in which case it becomes harder to discern
whose ‘side’ the viewer is supposed to identify with as the sequence proceeds
(there are interesting similarities with \textit{The Magic Flute} here).

B. Despite the points made in 1 and 2 above some would say that the texts
are examples of Orientalism and cultural imperialism; they are typical for
Hollywood: thieving of everyone else’s stories, philosophies, ways of
fighting, film-making techniques, even the music. The response would have
to be yes and no; the texts as a whole do \textit{take}, but they also acknowledge and
credit their sources in ways which are at least uncommon in Hollywood,
or the Western entertainment business more generally.\textsuperscript{27}

C. Is the multiracial ‘hybridity’ on offer not apparently sterile,
hyphenated, Americanised? Yes, in the movies at any rate. People with
different skins are mutual and separate, acting together and equally but while
they dance together promiscuously there appears to be no ‘mixed-race’ sex or
parenting: for example the leading African-Americans stay together, sexually
and in families; the Indian-looking child is given Indian-looking parents; the
Oracle is everyone’s aunt, and black – but a computer programme, apparently
past breeding age.\textsuperscript{28} Whatever the soundtrack is doing to make new blends,
this sexual politics looks depressingly like ‘multiculturalism’ as multiple-
 monoculturalism, acutely prone to the normalisation of the differences Gilroy
sees as perpetuating racism. This is why the Matrices might well in the end
be read as forming one of those ‘US models that are identified with an
inevitable future of racial conflict’\textsuperscript{29} and which Britain – and everyone,
everywhere else – should reject.

D. There is some referential wit, but little humour, certainly no comedy,
within the franchise. Nothing in the Matrix series is self-ironising. The
characters hardly smile, let alone laugh. There is little of the repartee we
expect from a Hollywood movie, let alone the British wit or whimsy which
Gilroy values so highly. This makes the movies relentless and the second and
third rather boring; if their message/ideological content were more
straightforward, they would be preachy.

\textsuperscript{26} The ambivalence of Morpheus as terrorist is noted strongly by Ian Watson in ‘Matrix as
Simulation’, in \textit{Exploring the Matrix: New Writings on the Matrix and the Cyber Present}, ed. by
Karen Haber (New York: Byron Preiss Books, 2003), pp.148-67. Watson adds that that the
‘terrorists’ slaughter real people when killing apparent cops (p.158).

\textsuperscript{27} See for example Timothy D. Taylor’s \textit{Strange Sounds: Music, Technology and Culture} (New
York: Routledge, 2001), an account of the complexities of theft (and subsequent copyright
defence of the theft) of traditional music by Western music business (see pp.117-35).

\textsuperscript{28} King and Leonard, p.38.

\textsuperscript{29} Gilroy, \textit{After}, p.157.
E. For all the excitement of the philosophers commenting on the texts in the DVD commentaries and website essays about the brave new world being represented, one might offer the following possible reading: that what we have here is not the British nostalgia for the loss of empire but an American *postalgia*. This is a representation of a future which is very obviously located as precisely in the present – in the Matrix itself, in white American male-dominated culture at the turn of the millennium – as is the glowing imperial past, recalled in contemporary, melancholy Britain for a racist present, which is described and critiqued by Gilroy. The Matrix is a world controlled by white men in black suits who think they can do no wrong and who can and do label anyone opposed to them as terrorists. The hero of the non-Matrix world’s resistance does not simply ‘defeat’ them but eventually fuses with their guardian angels. Such fantasies of a future world in which there is no qualification to American hegemony are as achingly disturbing as anything Ferguson can muster, perhaps especially given that they are the product of Hollywood’s latest attempt to exploit its own periphery (by incorporating the work of the experimental writer/directors).

**Conclusion**

This, however, might be seen as a melancholic British reading of a complex and relatively open cultural text whose meanings are still being changed, by those of its adherents playing the on-line game, and that might in the end be the point at which Gilroy’s vision can coalesce with this massive text. Whatever the possible readings available, no closure is yet possible, and the openness is being negotiated from a worldwide playership and on-line community with no obvious adherence to race or nation. Might not this community be the inheritor of the cosmopolitan politics desired by Gilroy, outlined in the 1930s-60s by a very small group of intellectuals, and now open to many (if not yet most) worldwide through electronic communication?

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Part Two
Reading Hybridity
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Hybrid Constructions:
Native Autobiography and the Open Curves of Cultural Hybridity

Zoe Trodd

Abstract

Colonial theorists often focus on binary dynamics of resistance or absorption – ignoring dialogic exchanges that negotiated the contact zone. But the bicultural autobiographies of William Apess and Charles Eastman, and the autobiographical collaborations of Black Elk with John Neihardt, and Mary Crow Dog with Richard Erdoes, have a dialogic nexus of exchange between narrators, editors, translators, audience, temporalities, genres and conventions; between Native and white, individual and community, subject and object, past and present, linear and cyclical time. As hybrid constructions, these intralinguistic autobiographies offered a multi-cultural vision beyond the rhetoric of melting pot or mosaic. Within a literary form that was traditionally monocultural, Native autobiographers expressed a relational, intersubjective individuality, and wove together Native and white literary traditions into transcultural documents. They used dialogic strategies against colonial dialectics, and crafted a hybrid borderland of resistance and freedom where possible worlds and multiple voices co-exist.

the most varied hybrid constructions hold sway in it, and it is always, to one degree or another, dialogized; inside this area a dialogue is played out […] that realizes itself within the boundaries of constructions

Introduction

‘Now we’ve burned our bridge behind us,’ joked someone. A group of American Indian Movement (AIM) activists at the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee had just burned a wooden bridge to prevent federal agents from sneaking behind Native American women and children. This figural and literal burning of a bridge between two cultures recalls the moment in 1915 when the Haitian writer Edmond Laforest tied a Larousse dictionary around his neck and leapt to his death from a bridge; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls Laforest’s suicide ‘a symbolic, if ironic, statement of the curious relation of

the marginalized writer,’ and ‘an emblem of [the] relation of overwhelming indenture.’ And as expressions of the impossibility of bridging a gulf between cultures, or of negotiating a non-destructive cultural encounter, both moments recall the end of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, when John the Savage, who is raised on a Native American reservation and encounters the works of William Shakespeare, ties a noose around his neck and jumps to his death from the archway of a light-house.

Exploring binary dynamics of resistance or absorption, colonial theories of what James Fenimore Cooper once called ‘the colonial wars of North America’ focus on these burned cultural bridges. Reciprocal exchange was seemingly lost in the white noise of imperialism. But these theories ignore dialogic exchanges that negotiated the contact zone and modelled the building of hybrid bridges across the gulf: bridges like that described in Irene Nakai’s poem ‘Bridge Perspective.’ Nakai writes:

\[
i \text{must be like a bridge} \\
\text{for my people} \\
i \text{may connect time; yesterday} \\
today and tomorrow – for my people \\
\text{who are in transition, also.} \\
i \text{must be enough in tomorrow, to give warning –} \\
\text{If i should,} \\
i \text{must be enough in yesterday, to hold a cherished secret.} \\
\text{Does it seem like we are walking as one?}
\]

This notion of bridging also appears in one Lakota image (of Lone Dog’s Winter Count, 1840-41) that represents peace between nations and visually reverses the usual colonial dynamic (a dark hand reaches down to white), while in a similar vein, Simon Pokagan’s 1897 piece, ‘The Future of the Red Man,’ argued against the idea of an ‘impassable gulf.’

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6 For an exception, see James Clifford’s *Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988): ‘Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other or resistance to the other […]. Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject?’ (p.344).
A more extended expression of the possibility of building cultural bridges has come within intralinguistic and intracultural Native autobiographies; in particular the bicultural autobiographies of William Apess (a quarter-white ‘civilized’ Indian) and Charles Eastman (a self-described quarter-white ‘Indian’ in ‘civilization’ and a ‘Christian’ in the ‘woods’), and the autobiographical collaborations of Black Elk with John Neihardt and Mary Crow Dog with Richard Erdoes. Within a traditionally monocultural literary form, Native autobiographers express a relational, intersubjective individuality, and weave together Native and white literary traditions into transcultural documents – selecting and inventing from what Mary Louise Pratt calls materials ‘transmitted to [subordinated or marginal groups] by a dominant or metropolitan culture.’ For, as Pratt adds: ‘While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.’

Captivity narratives trap whites within Indian culture, and conversion narratives contain Indians within white culture, but between these bounded spaces there is a frontier space, or a borderland of hybridity: the autobiographies collapse binaries of savage and civilized, and challenge the idea that the Native-white cultural encounter either makes the American-Indian an Indian-American, or else decisively vanishes Native culture – as though burying it under a violent hyphen. They are syncretic creations at a cultural crossroads, with a dialogic nexus of exchange between narrators, editors, translators, audience, temporalities, genres, and conventions; between Native and white, individual and community, public and private, subject and object, past and present, myth and history, orality and literacy, linear and cyclical time.

These dialogic strategies counter colonial dialectics and challenge America’s ‘negative utopia’ of borders. In place of this negative utopia, the autobiographers intersect time and space to create a spatial-temporal-historical zone, figured in their texts as a cross-road and an open curve or

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11 Pratt, p.6.

12 On the notion of borderland, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute/Spinsters, 1987).

loop – what Neihardt in a letter to poet George Sterling visualizes as. ¹⁴
And as hybrid constructions, the autobiographies offer a multi-cultural vision
beyond the rhetoric of melting pot or mosaic. Michel Foucault might term
this a heterotopia: a hybrid borderland of resistance and freedom where
possible worlds and multiple voices co-exist. ¹⁵

The Eyes of Another

_A person has no sovereign internal territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary;
looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another._ ¹⁶

Early Native American autobiographies were typically collaborations,
involving subject, editor, and often translator. But even those that were not
strictly collaborative often display Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense of ‘looking […]
into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another.’ For example, in his
autobiography _From the Deep Woods to Civilization_ (1916), Eastman seeks
at one point a ‘few perfect days’ of ‘the old, wild life as I knew it in my
boyhood’ and ‘plays Robinson Crusoe’ – here his multi-layered self is an
Indian who plays white playing an Indian playing a white hero playing
Native.¹⁷ The autobiographies employ polyphony and parody anthropological
Indian autobiographies in their various uses of the third-person voice:, in the
opening to _A Son of the Forest_ (1829), the first published Native
autobiography, Apess describes himself in the third-person (‘Apess [...] was
born’) and then often uses the language of spectatorship to express his
emotions (‘my crimes were arrayed before me’). He also imitates the voices
of whites (‘poor Indian’), just as he would later ventriloquize President
Jackson in his _Eulogy on King Phillip_ (1837): ‘You see my red children [...] you
need not cry, you must go.’¹⁸

Apess does locate his narrative within the public history of these whites,
as part of things ‘well known in that part of American history,’ or ‘generally
known,’ and pursues historically linear explanations of cause and effect;

attributing his ‘great patience’ to an ‘improved situation,’ or noting that a ‘cruel and unnatural conduct was the effect of some cause’ (*A Son* 3, 4, 6, 7). But he also explores the problem of having a ‘“character” to lose in the estimation of those who were accounted great,’ and writes against cause-and-effect historical explanation when it fixes the self into an expected pattern of behaviour: ‘as I had uttered an untruth about that,’ he says of one situation, people will ‘think that the person who will tell one lie will not scruple at two’ (*A Son* 18, 12). In his suspicion of history’s identity-fixing, he anticipates Eastman’s character, who ‘refused to allow the census taker to enumerate his people’ (*From the Deep* 171) or Crow Dog, who expresses in her autobiography a dislike of being ‘frozen in ghostly attitudes’ (*Lakota Woman* 7) and of being regarded as a ‘specimen to be filed away someplace’ (*Lakota Woman* 59). Just as his use of the third-person voice and his imitation of white voices appropriates spectatorial representations of Native Americans, so Apess was using Euro-American forms of history to express their limitations. He is often dismissed as a writer of Salvationism who wrote in one, Christianized voice and based his work on the providential narrative and the spiritual confession, with a pattern of conversion, questioning, fall, and redemption. But he included educational narratives, coup tales, and self-vindications from the oral tradition, and his Methodist rhetoric signifies upon and criticizes the dominant culture.

Similarly, Eastman signifies upon Euro-American rhetoric and philosophies of history in his autobiography, often incorporating models of tradition and progress via conversations with his grandmother and father. But Eastman’s is a multi-temporal autobiographical self, layered like Beloit College, which, as he notes, ‘cover[s] the site of an ancient village of moundbuilders [...] show[ing] to great advantage [...] the neat camps, where the green grass was evenly cut with lawn mowers’ (*From the Deep* 52). There is an ongoing dialogue between past and present – the experiencing self of the present and the narrating self of the future – as when he notes in a narrative spoiler: ‘I little dreamed that a daughter of mine would ever be among them’ (*From the Deep* 72).

Eastman expresses a hybrid identity through first and third person pronoun shifts as well, most notably when he feels ashamed (‘He was called “Baby”’), or when he wants to distance himself from shameful acts: he uses ‘we’ and ‘us’ when the United States betrays the Sioux, but ‘them’ when describing the massacre of 1862 (*From the Deep* 23). And, like Apess, he imitates white voices to highlight a sense of self-spectacle, writing at one point: ‘Custer’s gallant command was annihilated by the hostile Sioux,’ where ‘gallant’ and ‘hostile’ are his classmates’ thoughts (*From the Deep* 53). Several other voices appear throughout. He incorporates the voice of his grandmother when he writes directly to her (‘You had forgotten one of the
first principles of your own teaching’), and then imagines her answer: ‘“All I want to say to you,” the old grandmother seems to answer’ (*From the Deep* 28). He even represents his white wife as a competing text: he knows her in print ‘from her “Apple Blossoms” in Boston, and [...] her later articles on Indian education,’ so that at their first meeting she is ‘not entirely a stranger,’ encounters her again in print when he finds students ‘in the act of reading an essay on my wife,’ and then prints a photograph of her reading (*From the Deep* 86, 146, 126).

His wife, Elaine Goodale Eastman, later claimed that she ‘collaborated more or less’ on all his books,19 and that her typing of his handwritten drafts was a process of ‘revising, omitting, and re-writing as necessary.’20 Her collaboration likely explains some of these polyvocal aspects of the text, just as collaboration with Erdoes impacted the final voice expressed in Crow Dog’s *Lakota Woman* – Crow Dog said of Erdoes:

> We work together pretty good, but sometimes he’ll put stuff I didn’t want anyone to know. [...] Some of the stuff, he would reword it. I would say, “Gee whiz, I don’t talk like this.” And he would say, “Nobody will know, nobody will pay attention.” He broke it off and left it at that. 21

But Eastman’s polyvocality also stems from what he eventually expresses as the evenly balanced double-identity of ‘an Indian [...] an American’ – a hybrid self turning round the point of cultural encounter:

> I am an Indian; and while I have learned much from civilization, for which I am grateful, I have never lost my Indian sense of right and justice. I am for development and progress along social and spiritual lines, rather than those of commerce, nationalism, or material efficiency. Nevertheless, so long as I live, I am an American. (*From the Deep* 195)

Equally, Black Elk’s collaboration with the white Christian Neihardt might in part explain the polyvocality, or the ‘truth’ of ‘two faces,’ in *Black Elk Speaks* (1932).22 Neihardt observed that Black Elk’s autobiography was a ‘work of art with two collaborators,’ and that his function was ‘both creative

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21 Christopher Wise, ‘Mary Brave Bird Speaks’, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, 10.4 (1998), 1-7 (pp.2, 6).
and editorial.'23 His contribution was not ‘translation’ but ‘transformation – of what was given,’ he explained, and he wrote to his publisher about the ‘very peculiar merging of consciousness between me and Black Elk.’24 Neihardt does function as the framing device for the book, and as ‘Flaming Rainbow,’ Black Elk’s Lakota name for him, he is the rainbow door for the great vision and so the gateway between two worlds.

Neihardt’s contribution likely included the book’s echoes of the King James Bible and American transcendentalists, its use of Christian symbols, and the incorporation of genres like the confession, memoir, and apology. But alongside are Native ritual performances, chants, monologues, dialogues, poetry, drawings, dream-talks, kill-talks, and set pieces that disrupt chronology, and Black Elk Speaks incorporates Euro-American discourse to demonstrate that the nations are connected; that, as Black Elk puts it, ‘my children and yours are relative-like and therefore we shall go back to the hoop and here we’ll cooperate and stand as one’ (Black 294). With Sitting Bull, Black Elk might have remarked: ‘When you find anything good in the white man’s road, pick it up but when you find something bad […] leave it alone.’25

In addition, Black Elk emphasizes his own plural, self-collaborative identity, like Apess and Eastman. He creates a composite first-person voice, setting up a dialogue between his ‘little’ self and ‘bigger’ self; the self narrating from ‘high hill of my old age,’ ‘from a lonely hilltop,’ and the self narrated, who was ‘too young to understand’ (Black 8, 276, 2, 49). He also imagines himself as others see him: each time he refers to himself as a ‘pitiful old man’ he includes the phrase ‘you can see,’ or ‘you see me,’ and during his vision he experiences a separation of selves, seeing ‘a sick boy that was myself’ and a ‘someone’ that is him (Black 276, 279, 210, 47, 45). These multiple selves create counterfactual existences, and he notes that things ‘could have [happened like that], just as well as not,’ or that a different life-story, a ‘tale of a great hunter [...] warrior [...] traveler,’ may well ‘seem to be the very tale itself’ (Black 66, 1).26 His world is heterochronous, and his vision blends into life until, like Crazy Horse, he lives across two realities (Black 51, 77, 87, 85, 173).

23 Qtd. in Sally McCluskey, ‘Black Elk Speaks and So Does John Neihardt’, Western American Literature, 6 (1972), 231-42 (p.238).
24 Qtd. in The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Give to John G. Neihardt, ed. by Raymond DeMallie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp.40-1; emphasis original.
26 See Bakhtin: plot is ‘conceived as only one of many possible plots,’ and ‘nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future’ (Problems, pp.84, 166).
Elsewhere, the heterochronic or counterfactual features as an expression of bicultural identity. In *Lakota Woman*, Crow Dog feels a ‘spectator’ on her life, refers to herself in the third-person, and views herself at one point as ‘the strange woman lying dead in my bed’ (*Lakota Woman* 200, 185). She is ‘white outside and red inside, just the opposite of an apple’ and, as an Indian living ‘a life that we were not put on this earth for,’ has a ‘split personality’ (*Lakota Woman* 94, 97, 251). She feels the ‘shock of having to deal at the same time with the myth and the reality,’ encounters the stereotypes of the Noble Savage and the Drunken Indian, Indian ‘caricatures of white people,’ the ‘old-fashioned vision [and] just a caricature of one,’ and ‘ghostlike’ Native men (*Lakota Woman* 183, 30, 59, 149).

This biculturalism is further evident in the encounter of Native and white literary models within her text: she draws on the confessional form and the conversion narrative to dramatize her journey from ‘half breed’ to ‘traditional Sioux woman’ and on toward the purification in the Sweat Lodge (*Lakota Woman* 251). Yet Crow Dog also incorporates song-like rhythms, ending the refrains with a chorus-line:

I am [...] I am [...] I am [...] I had [...] when [...] my [...] my [...] it is being [...] It is being [...] That is not easy [...] It’s hard being a woman. [...] No, it isn’t easy [...] It isn’t easy. (*Lakota Woman* 3-5, 11)

And, like her husband Leonard’s songs, which ‘sound as if two or three men were singing,’ her text absorbs multiple voices, imitating and paraphrasing white and Indians, and even making a poem from a government report (*Lakota Woman* 228, 28).

Emerging from the Native-white cultural encounter in all four of these bicultural autobiographies is a hybrid, relational self. This creation – born of looking inside oneself as though ‘into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another,’ as Bakhtin puts it – appropriates the language of mirroring used by writers like Cooper to taxonomize his fictional cultures. Whites sought an indigenous identity via selective appropriation and imitation of Native Americans, using what Apess calls ‘The Indian’s Looking Glass for the White Man’ (1833) in his essay of the same title.\(^\text{27}\) But Native

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\(^{27}\) William Apess, ‘The Indian’s Looking Glass for the White Man’, in Apess, *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, ed. by Barry O’Connell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp.155-61. See also Crow Dog: ‘our religion and ceremonies have become fads, and a fashionable pastime among many whites seeking for something that they hope will give meaning to their empty lives’ (*Lakota Woman* 233), and Sherman Alexie’s poem ‘How to Write the Great American Indian Novel’, in *The Summer of Black Widows*, by Sherman Alexie (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 1996), pp.94-5, in which white people are Indians, and Indians are ghosts.
autobiographers turned to ‘the mirror’ to find ‘who and what’ they were (Lakota Woman 9), and then set up a shifting reflective surface of their own.

**A Place for Encounters**

*Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible[...]. Of special importance is the close link between the motif of meeting and the chronotope of the road [...]. The road is a particularly good place for encounters [...] the most various fates may collide and interweave*\(^{28}\)

The dialogic, hybrid self doubles and fragments in the rippling layered surfaces of these heteroglossic Native autobiographies, and a mode of repetition-with-difference shatters the closed-circle of mirror-imaging – replacing it with an open curve or forward loop. The horizontal perspective of linear or narrative time meets the vertical perspective of the layered or plural self at a chronotopic intersection. Time meets space and time intersects with timelessness to make what Mircea Eliade calls a ‘hoop.’\(^{29}\)

The encounter is not always positive: in Apess’s autobiography, for example, the intersection of past and present ‘makes [Apess] shudder,’ and the appearance at that intersection of a ‘future state of existence’ makes him ‘sore afraid,’ for ‘the future state of mankind’ is an ‘awful weight’ (A Son 5, 9, 12). There is a similarly uncomfortable intersection of temporalities in Eastman’s autobiography: the ‘day of the Indian had passed forever,’ giving way to a ‘perfect stream of humanity,’ but things now ‘unfold before [him]’ and ‘come and pass with a wearsome regularity, like walking railway ties’ (From the Deep 62, 48, 46). The linear railroad ‘monster’ bursts into Native life. Just as Apess had shuddered, so Eastman ‘shivers’ to think of ‘the trail’ and its ‘end’ (From the Deep 26).\(^{30}\) Apess’s intersection is the place where Christian time meets Native time, and Eastman finds himself at the temporal crossroads of Native culture with both the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ model and that of Social Darwinists, where a white society that ‘keeps the old things and continually adds to them new improvements’ encounters an Indian society ‘will not change [its] ways’ or seek a ‘change’ in ‘prospects’ and instead embraces ‘existence’ (From the Deep 44, 64, 6, 5).\(^{31}\)

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\(^{28}\) Bakhtin, *Dialogic*, pp.250, 98, 243.


\(^{31}\) See also Henry David Thoreau in a journal entry of 1858, quoted in Robert F. Sayre’s *Thoreau and the American Indian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977): ‘this history of the white man is a history of improvement, that of the red man a history of fixed habits of stagnation’ (p.153).
But in Apess’s autobiography, the linear time of Christianity (a ‘river [...] flowing continually,’ the mind that ‘flowed as a river,’ and the ‘good man’s path’) is challenged by a thwarted bildungsroman linearity (‘I expected that on reaching the town I should be metamorphosed into a person of consequence,’ writes Apess [A Son 21, 33, 14]). Or Eastman, as well as incorporating Native and white voices into his polyphonic text to make a dialogic, hybrid autobiographical identity, criss-crosses Native and white philosophies of history to make ‘[t]he road [...] a particularly good place for encounters’ and to find a cross-roads where ‘the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another,’ as Bakhtin puts it. For example, his title inscribes a measured linearity (from the [...] to the), and Elaine’s foreword to the autobiography claims its movement is that of ‘a single-hearted quest.’

Eastman borrows from the bildungsroman, the education narrative, the spiritual confession and conversion narrative, references ‘records of experience for future generations,’ and follows an ‘endless [...] new trail’ with a ‘dream of far-off goal’ while learning to make ‘a straight furrow’ toward ‘the point of knowledge’ (From the Deep 8, 27, 28). Indian culture is ‘moth-eaten and ruined,’ and the autobiography ends with a vision of ‘development and progress along social and spiritual lines’ (From the Deep 180, 195). The crossroads seem to have become a linear path – the ‘decision [...] only [...] one way’ (From the Deep 61).

Yet in trying to make a ‘straight furrow’ he does it ‘poorly’ and ‘loses’ his ‘foothold’ on the linear path (From the Deep 27, 47). He knows that Euro-American forms of temporality have delimited the world so that it feels as small as the ‘painted globe’ that he sees in class. These forms mean measuring the world ‘in time or money or distance’ and ‘dividing the day itself’ so that whites ‘know how many times one can breath in a day’ – noting this measurement of breath just after describing his own ‘panting ponies,’ their ‘deep breaths’ (From the Deep 47, 20, 19, 18). So he also subverts the conventional forms of the linear conversion narrative: there is no baptism or dramatic moment of conversion, and when seeking light he goes into the dark woods (From the Deep 26). Though he describes himself as a ‘pioneer,’ he eventually notes that he works in a ‘line of defense,’ not attack and advancement (From the Deep 188). At the end of the book he winds ‘in and out of the island labyrinth’ and finds his boat blown from the ‘narrow channel’ and the ‘known course,’ for ‘much of [the] lake is not charted’ (From the Deep 178, 179). Loops, curves, and pauses disrupt the linear imagery and the view of time that justified encroachment on land – so

challenging the mapped space of Manifest Destiny and the spatiotemporal territory of the nation-state.

Eastman uses what he calls a ‘method [...] of indirection’ (From the Deep 166) as well as forward direction, just as Elaine had noted the importance of ‘reading between the lines,’ as well the existence of ‘broad outlines,’ in her foreword. While ‘the way opens’ in his first chapter as though it will be a linear narrative, it immediately changes course like the ‘pause’ of a little brook moving toward an ‘unknown ocean’ (From the Deep 1). Throughout, history stops and starts: he narrates the reincarnation of his father and of others beginning ‘life over again’ (From the Deep 69, 6-7, 147), and while his response to a ‘surrounded’ circle is to think ‘of almost everything that had happened to me up to that day,’ these memories do not come in linear fashion (From the Deep 188, 11, 12). In addition, he subverts narrative tenses at critical moments, for example going back to the forest ‘past’ but shifting to the present tense (From the Deep 175).

Finally, he does not choose one spatiotemporal territory or another but finds a borderland – a space between the polarities of frontier expansion: his open loop in the last paragraph is a repetition-with-difference: ‘I am an Indian [...] I am an American’ (From the Deep 195). An Indian converts a white man to Christianity, a white guide leads him into the wilderness, reading can be like hunting, book-learning a warpath (From the Deep 29, 44, 32), and he is an Indian in civilization and Christian in the woods, with ‘savage gentleness and native refinement,’ amid ‘the savagery of civilization’ and the ‘warfare of civilized life’ (From the Deep 165). In a land of border and lines there are also crossroads: the physical ‘crossing’ where he pauses on his journey toward white culture, and the symbolic ‘crossing’ of ‘many tracks’ that his father explains (From the Deep 9, 19, 29).

Reality is an intersection of times in Black Elk Speaks, as well: the timeless Red Road runs North to South, the clocked Black Road runs West to East, and the traditional hoop has red and black roads intersecting in Black Elk’s vision. The Lakota Indians order time by event not chronology in their reminiscences (Black 17-8); just as Crow Dog would later rail against ‘that damn clock – white man’s time as opposed to Indian time, which is natural time,’ and protest ‘marching by the clock’ or ‘punching a time-clock’ in the white man’s world (Lakota Woman 29, 32, 57, 92). But the white man’s squares, lines, and bounded horizon that ‘drop[s] off where the water ended […] stop[s] where the sky came down to the water,’ intersect with the

33 Goodale Eastman, ‘Foreword’, p.xviii; emphasis added.
34 See also Black Elk and John Epes Brown, The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), where Black Elk combines red road and black, and Christian apocalypse with Lakota cycles, noting that ‘the end is rapidly approaching, and then [the ball] will be returned to the center, and our people will be with it’ (p.138).
Native ‘circle of peace,’ the philosophy of cycles, the ‘circles of [...] warfare,’ the ‘whole wide circle of the day,’ the imagery of bird’s nest, hoop and the anti-linear Ghost Dance religion (*Black* 222, 198-99, 204, 42).

This encounter of red road and black in *Black Elk Speaks* brushes history a new way: time runs upstream, and people move backwards up a hill and run whilst walking as they confront the onward progression of Euro-American history (*Black* 113, 119, 126). Black Elk even moves backward in time, watching himself get younger and seeing himself move in reverse (*Black* 30, 231). Then, in the ultimate metaphor for bicultural, temporal encounter, he wears a watch for long time before finding out that it is time (*Black* 130). The synchronization movement was a hypersymbolized aspect of Empire, clock coordination literal and metaphorical, but while Edward Curtis famously removed a clock from one of his anthropological photographs, in part because the clock showed the wrong time, Black Elk carries a stopped clock. He makes the watch tick again, though not necessarily at the correct time.

This temporal intersection of red and black roads is a borderland between becoming and being, where colours might blend as though in a rainbow. In a traditional ritual, Black Elk explains, a rainbow is painted over the door through which a man passes when still becoming, and through which he exits when he has become. Making the invisible spectrum of light visible, the rainbow is also the visible part of a complete circle, the other half seeming to vanish into the ground: Lakota Indians called their hoops ‘rainbows,’ because only part of the rainbow, a hoop-shape, is visible.

Black Elk dwells in this borderland place of becoming, and his autobiography finds a crossroads where the two roads of reality and vision meet (rather than finding, as in the Euro-American autobiographical tradition, a crossroads at one crisis in a life-story and then dramatizing the road taken or the road less-travelled). He has a great vision early in life and then has to bring reality in line with the vision, rather than seek – as in Euro-American spiritual autobiographies – the word of God in an inner or physical forward pilgrimage. Prophecy disrupts chronology, bringing the future into the present, so that at one moment of present-future people are even turned upside-down, or elsewhere Black Elk is homesick for a place that is also in the future (*Black* 136, 50, 159). Accordingly, the legend of the first chapter precedes the story of his birth, and repetition stops narrative time throughout the text (*Black* 7).

But like many white editors with a chronological imperative, Neihardt did give Black Elk’s life-story a chronology, admitting in a letter: ‘Black Elk did

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not sit and tell me his story in a chronological order [...] The beginning and the ending are mine.’ Neihardt allows for renewal, ending chapter 24 with butchered babies and opening chapter 25 with the recovery of a baby from the ‘long grave.’ But the lines: ‘A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream,’ are not in the original typescript. Neihardt added further teleology through spoilers that anticipate a ‘people’s dream that ended in bloody snow,’ or ‘big trouble’ coming (Black 2, 65), and he ends Black Elk’s story with the Battle of Wounded Knee, not his life beyond that, as though emphasizing the death of Native culture rather than its survival and continued negotiations. ‘And so it was all over,’ Neihardt writes, seeming to vanish the Indian like Franz Boas’s anthropology or Edward Curtis’s photography (Black 276).

But in the ‘Author’s Postscript’ to the autobiography, rain falls and the sky clears to make way for a rainbow. Black Elk had remembered: ‘I saw a Flaming Rainbow [...]. Over me there was a spotted eagle soaring, and he said to me “Remember this”’ (253), and now Neihardt’s collaboration becomes the way to remember this. As the ‘flaming rainbow’ he makes Black Elk’s dream visible and collaboratively passes it on: ‘You are here and have the vision just the way I wanted,’ Black Elk told Neihardt. ‘[T]he tree will bloom again and the people will know the true facts.’ Then, in the moment when Black Elk finds a harmony of self and world, his tears mingling with rain and his face ‘uplifted,’ Neihardt rhymes ‘rain’ and ‘again,’ further restoring the circle and hoop through form (Black 42, 280).

In fact, far from championing what he once called the ‘ancient Aryan spirit,’ Neihardt believed this spirit to be ‘a prairie fire [...] destined to burn across the world,’ illuminating but also destroying. He decried the ‘scramble of the acquisitive instincts, to cherish the higher values as evolved through ages of race experience,’ believing it would ‘ensure defeat.’ He heard instead a dialogue between past and present – perhaps a Socratic dialogue: ‘Sometimes this close sense of the unity of all time and all human experience has come upon me so strongly that I have felt, for an intense moment, how just a little hurry on my part might get me there in time to hear [...] Socrates telling his dreams to his judges,’ he explained. Far from being a straight line, history for Neihardt was as a series of open loops, as he explained in a letter to the poet George Sterling: ‘Progress seems to me an illusion. As I conceive it, we do not proceed toward perfection upon an

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36 Qtd. in McCluskey, p.238.
38 John. G. Neihardt, Laureate Address (1921), qtd. in Holloway, p.25
ascending straight line; not even upon an upward curve. I would diagram the
course of Civilization like this: 999999999 etc.”

Neihardt emphasized his philosophy of history as a series of open loops in
the titles of his own autobiographies (*All Is but a Beginning* [1971] and
*Patterns and Coincidences* [1978]), and returned to visit Black Elk in order
to complete the story of renewal (*When the Tree flowered: an Authentic Tale
of the Old Sioux World* [1951]). In addition, short narrative pieces in *Black
Elk Speaks* begin and end with *almost* the same phrase – ‘It was very bad [...]’
It was bad’ – as though looping forward (*Black* 15-7). The encounter of line
and circle, *eidos* and *telos* produces an open curve of repetition-with-
difference, and a dialogic feedback loop.

Crow Dog wrote history as repetition-with-difference as well. In her
autobiography, reality threatens to become the mirror-image of a fictionalized
culture in the wake of Native-white encounter: she encounters a replica of the
Mayflower, and ponders the forms of white culture on the pages of
catalogues, from the added distance of ‘an outhouse’ (*Lakota Woman* 189,
21). Whites expect a Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, people try to look like
Marlboro ads, a sheriff walks right out of a Grade B Western, and scenes
look like Vietnam films or a ‘cheap World War Two Movie’ (*Lakota Woman*
90, 116, 120, 195, 218, 136). Protesting this fictional culture, AIM activists
eventually set fire to an imitation pioneer log cabin and turn the American
flag upside-down (*Lakota Woman* 121, 150). Modern Native culture that tries
to mirror or repeat the past as a closed loop seems as watered-down as these
fictions: at one point young Indian men try to hunt and can only bring in an
old bull (*Lakota Woman* 134).

Throughout the siege at Wounded Knee, however, the past returns in full
force – ‘like the old days’ (*Lakota Woman* 167). The activists fight on the
anniversary of Custer battle, ghosts rise from a mass grave, and later Crow
Dog hears ‘women crying, babies screaming, cannon shots’ when she walks
‘along Cankpe Opi Wakpala where our women and children had been killed
in 1890’ (*Lakota Woman* 195, 8, 145). She wonders: ‘Is it the vision of a
tragedy still to come, of history repeating itself?’ To her husband, Leonard,
this closed loop of history seems natural, for the Crow Dogs have ‘no
shortage of legends’; the past is not ‘ancient history’ for them but ‘what
happened only yesterday’ (*Lakota Woman* 9, 177). Leonard’s ‘acute sense of
history’ means he repeats the 1884 surrender at the courthouse and gradually
makes the Sun Dance more severe until it repeats the ritual of 150 years ago
(*Lakota Woman* 238, 258).

But Crow Dog knows ‘[no] big deeds of some ancestors’ (*Lakota Woman*
8). Grappling with ‘problems of identity’ she looks in ‘all the Lakota history

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40 Qtd. in Holloway, p.30.
books’ for details of her past and tries to measure up to the standards of ‘the old buffalo days’ (*Lakota Woman* 9, 17, 176). She learns, however, that modern Natives might create their *own* legends through historical repetition-*with-difference*, in an open loop. She sees Indians count coup on armoured cars, lay trails of urine and pepper for dogs, and make AIM a new Ghost Dance with its own songs (*Lakota Woman* 135, 139, 73, 77). She realizes that the land is good for ‘talking of great deeds done in the past’ but that they ‘can’t live forever off the deeds of Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse,’ and notes: ‘You have to make your own legends now’ (*Lakota Woman* 11). So she creates and recounts her ‘own legends’: the birth of her baby during a firefight, where her breasts are as hard as the muzzles of guns, her own birth backwards, her article which is the ‘worst thing [...] in the school’s long history,’ her shoplifting which is ‘like counting coup,’ and her tracking of Leonard when he is moved from jail to jail (*Lakota Woman* 3-4, 8, 35, 61, 224). She even decides to have her baby at Wounded Knee ‘no matter what,’ so as to place her new legend and this new life into the closed loop of ghosts and slaughter (*Lakota Woman* 126).

In these ways she gathers up ‘the broken pieces of the sacred hoop and put them together again’ to make a legend of fragments and objects, ‘odds and ends’ (like her house) (*Lakota Woman* 155, 172). The reassembled hoop comprises layers of past and present, old and new stories; in the manner of the Ghost Dance story, told by an Indian to a dreamer who tells a leader in the presence of Dick Fool Bull who tells Crow Dog who tapes him. (*Lakota Woman* 151). She now relays the taped story to Erdoes who re-tapes and transcribes it – completing a loop of seven stages.

Crow Dog knows that this looping movement of storytelling through time and space challenges the confinement of the modern Indian, ‘fenced in’ amid ‘railroad tracks and [...] barbed-wire fences,’ far from the ‘outside world’ and in a ‘vacuum’ or ‘attic cell’ (*Lakota Woman* 6, 148-9, 18, 26, 32). The ‘corner is where the Indian lives,’ she writes, but her looped ‘roaming’ through storied layers toward her own legend makes her ‘more Indian’ (*Lakota Woman* 51, 72). Like the turtle woman who is ‘constantly on the road,’ or the turtle at the end of Eastman’s autobiography who is ‘at home’ because he carries his home on his back, Crow Dog finds a shifting borderland space that she can call home, beyond the confinements of stereotypes and old stories (*Lakota Woman* 25). Legends beat there like the heart of the turtle after it is dead (*Lakota Woman* 24), and she can affirm: ‘still I go on [...] Life goes on’ (*Lakota Woman* 56, 262).
Leaving Traces

This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing [...], an extratemporal hiatus that appears between two moment of a real time sequence, in this case one that is biographical. 41

If life goes on, then ‘[l]iving means leaving traces.’42 Finding along history’s looping trail signs of gain and loss, ‘wear and tear,’ these hybrid autobiographies salvage ruins as traces (Lakota Woman 262). In the face of erasure, and occasionally offered monuments to their passing, Native autobiographers resisted the narrative of vanishing through texts that set voices and times in dialogue and leave traces of that dialogue – just as the spirits leave tracks after their visit in Black Elk, or Black Bear brings back a ‘little rock’ from his spiritual encounter in Lakota Woman (179, 152).43

Bakhtin writes of an ‘empty time’ or ‘hiatus’ that ‘leaves no traces anywhere,’ but these texts instead find what Jean Baudrillard calls the ‘residue of history.’44 For example, Eastman initially expects to find the ‘refuge’ of ‘primitive man’ a ‘virgin wilderness’ of ‘fairy-like verdure,’ but he encounters traces of the past in the form of ruined furs and abandoned goods (From the Deep 173, 180). Then, though the night feels ‘perfectly still,’ there is a repeated ‘loud scratching’ at the door: a turtle marking time and leaving a scratched trace of his encounter with the ‘intruders’ (From the Deep 180-1). The autobiography itself becomes another trace, for narration produces what Apess calls ‘an impression’ that can never be effaced’ (A Son 11). Eastman, who makes the world, stars, mill, farmhouse, and stone, speak stories (From the Deep 39, 64, 74), observes that words are like ‘bird’s track and fish-fin studies on the sand’ (From the Deep 35), just as he explained elsewhere that tracks are a ‘language’ that tell a ‘history,’ footprints the ‘wood-dwellers autograph’ that can be ‘read’ if not ‘illegible.’45

41 Bakhtin, Dialogic, p.91.
43 For the language of erasure, see Francis Parkman, The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War, vol. 3 (Boston: Little and Brown, 1898), pp.187-89; and Joseph Kossuth Dixon, The Vanishing Race: the Last Great Indian Council. A Record in Picture and Story of the Last Great Indian Council, Participated in by Eminent Indian Chiefs from Nearly Every Indian Reservation in The United States, together with the Story of Their Lives as Told by Themselves, Their Speeches and Folklore Tales, Their Solemn Farewell and the Indians’ Story of the Custer Fight (New York: Bonanza Books, 1913).
In Crow Dog’s late twentieth-century autobiography, however, there is an attempt at a double erasure. Whites have already replaced Indian history with a church, ‘the monument of an alien faith imposed upon the landscape,’ and left Indian graves unmarked (*Lakota Woman* 124). Now, after the AIM resistance at Wounded Knee, they flatten out the museum and trading post so that only the ‘huge, rusty open safe remains,’ or perhaps a ‘.50 caliber shell or an empty trip-wire flare canister.’ Again, ‘[e]verything is gone. No landmark is left.’ Twice in history ‘the government tried to extinguish all visible reminders that Indians once made their stand here’ (*Lakota Woman* 168-9).

But Crow Dog finds traces of the past in the present. She can ‘still make out the circle made by many footsteps’ and she stumbles across ‘bones of long-extinct animals’ (*Lakota Woman* 152). And while she might yearn for the traceless land ‘before the white man came,’ and AIM activists might bury Plymouth Rock under sand to erase the ‘white man’s conquest,’ her encounter with both white culture and Native legend involves ‘retracing [...] steps’ and finding traces on top of traces, like the new headstone of Buddy on the storied site of Wounded Knee (*Lakota Woman* 169, 189 84, 143). She knows too that traces of this second cultural encounter will endure in dialogue with the future: bullets will remain after bodies have died and dissolved as ‘evidence’ of what whites have done, like the bullet hole in Annie Mae’s skull (*Lakota Woman* 180, 197). There will be ‘no signposts’ but rather signs, like the ‘bloody footprints’ and the ‘battleground of scars’ on Leonard’s chest – a storied site of battle (*Lakota Woman* 55, 253). Ultimately, Crow Dog knows, any attempt to erase the traces ‘will do them no good,’ for whites ‘cannot extinguish the memory in our hearts, a memory we will pass on to generations still unborn’ (*Lakota Woman* 169).

This faith in a dialogue with the future, via the ‘passing on’ of history’s traces to ‘generations still unborn,’ drives Black Elk’s narration. He emphasizes the importance of the ‘visible tracks,’ ‘visible breath,’ the horror of losing words when they escape him like a ‘fog,’ and, like Crow Dog, connects past to present through the trace of a bullet: ‘I will show you where the bullet struck [...] (showing a long deep scar),’ he says (*Black* 4, 49, 272). As an object that connects the space between gun and target, a bullet symbolizes one kind of destructive dialogue or burning bridge, like Eastman’s ‘books’ as ‘bows and arrows,’ but here it connects Neihardt to Black Elk’s past via the physical trace of a scar (*From the Deep* 16).

In addition, the book itself – like Neihardt’s symbol of history’s movement (ϑ) – is a loop out and on: their dialogue moves back and forth and changes both participants, marking its dialogic process via the tiny line in Neihardt’s symbol that links loop to loop and opens an otherwise closed circle. This open loop, and Black Elk’s sense of Neihardt as a ‘word-sender,’
is a different model of dialogue to the bullet or arrow – a bridge that does not burn but rather flames like a ‘rainbow’: ‘This world is like a garden,’ said Black Elk. ‘Over this garden go [Neihardt’s] words like rain, and where they fall they leave it a little greener. And when his words have passed, the memory of them will stand long in the west like a flaming rainbow.’ The cultural encounter of Black Elk and Neihardt, their dialogue, and Neihardt’s narration of Black Elk’s vision, all leave traces of green on the land and traces of color in the sky. In one pictograph in Black Elk Speaks the dialogue is even visualized on the page: a curving trail runs from elk to man’s mouth – a trace of hybridity bridging the gulf (Black 199).

Filled with Echoes

Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances [...]. At the base of the [almost a memoir genre] lies [...] the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth. The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth 47

Supporting Bakhtin’s notion that ‘[e]ach utterance is filled with echoes,’ so that language itself is a chamber of trails and traces, Native autobiographies close the distance between past and present, text and audience, Native and white culture, through echo-chambers of voices, times, and traces that also involve the reader as a dialogic participant, ‘trail[ing] every word.’ The autobiographers inscribed their texts with an awareness of audience: Apess notes that certain facts are ‘given not with a view of appearing great in the estimation of others,’ or are related ‘to show the reader how we were treated,’ and poses a series of rhetorical questions to the reader (A Son 4, 5), while Black Elk Speaks implies questions from readers and emphasizes the ‘you’ throughout (Black 203, 208-9).

On five occasions Black Elk acknowledges an audience just after explaining that he must tell his vision in order to use it. He explains: ‘If I thought I was doing it myself [...] no power could come through,’ for ‘a man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until after he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see’ (Black 209, 208). He therefore

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46 Qtd. in Holloway, p.83.
shows and performs his vision, realizing it through his audience. The ‘power was in the meaning,’ he says, but then amends this: the ‘power of it was in the understanding of its meaning’ (Black 210, 216; emphasis added). The reader must ‘live that story,’ and become like the singing birds at the end of the book: Black Elk teaches them his vision as though it is a song, so that ‘some little root of the sacred tree still lives’ (Black 1, 280). ‘Nourish it then, that it may leaf and bloom and fill with singing birds,’ he tells Neihardt and his audience (Black 280).

As a performance, Black Elk’s narrative makes words into events or acts, the whole universe a symbol that can be contained in a hat (Black 240). Saying something makes it true, and thoughts make reality, he repeatedly insists (Black 5, 94, 104, 86). The world is an event in process and words create what Eastman calls in Indian Boyhood (1902) a ‘living book.’ They also ‘make the trail,’ as Diane Glancy notes: ‘The Word is important in Native American tradition. You speak the path on which you walk. Your words make the trail. You have to be careful with words. They can shape the future.’ This ongoing negotiation between word and world demands an actively participating reader: the dialogic process of performative narration and world-making sets readers alongside Black Elk, his translating son, Neihardt, Neihardt’s transcribing daughter, and tribal members who participate in the story-telling. Filling Black Elk’s utterances with their own echoes, readers help to challenges the rule of ‘everybody for himself and with little rules of his own,’ everyone with ‘his own little vision that he followed’ (Black 219, 37).

But these autobiographies also collapse the assumption that such a relational matrix is on the other side of an impassable gulf from the Euro-American autobiographical tradition, with its solitary heroes and individualized identities. Black Elk desires to save his own ‘Great Vision’ (Black xi), just as Crow Dog’s autobiography is a way to remember, revise and pass on her inheritance. She uses it as a ritualized rebirth like the Sweat Lodge ritual, a circular rite like the Ghost Dance, and a journey like the Yuwipi ceremony, until she becomes ‘wholly Indian’ and cries: ‘A Voice I will send’ (Lakota Woman 260). Eastman even narrates an incident where he reveals himself to save himself. Encountering a potential enemy, he shows himself and is asked, ‘Are you a Sioux?’ ‘Yes,’ he answers, and the exposure and self-definition saves his life (From the Deep 12).

49 See Bakhtin: ‘There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context [...] Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival’ (Problems, p.170).
If Native convention reaches across the gulf toward the Euro-American autobiographical tradition of self-creation and self-preservation, then the bridge is crossed both ways. Negotiating past and ideal selves, essential and constructed selves, states of being and processes of becoming, Euro-American autobiographies have revisited the past in order to move toward the future through an open curve. And the hybrid, dialogic self of these Native autobiographies is perhaps that of the Euro-American participant-observer writ large: often expressing a national consciousness and a philosophy of the individual in relation to national community, Euro-American autobiographies have been an important part of nation-making. They have asked, with J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, what is this American, this new man?\(^{52}\), and the American Adam has answered, with Black Elk: ‘Behold this day, for it is yours to make’ (Black 42).

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The Necessity and Impossibility of Being Mixed-Race in Asian American Literature

Sheng-mei Ma

Abstract

The mixed race consciousness increasingly emerges in recent Asian American discourse. But even when mixed-race characters materialize out of general negligence in literature, they function less in the utopian sliver of space called mixed race than in the dystopian racist climates of either of the two cultures of origin. The meaning of the mixed race lies in its disappearance into one or the other race, at the moment of racial discrimination. This article looks back at literary expressions by mixed-race Asian Americans in terms of three nodes of convergence: The Eaton sisters – Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna – around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century; the undying genre of interracial romance which I call ‘lomansu’; the multiracial movement since the 1970s census reform and the stage productions of Velina Hasu Houston and Dmae Roberts, both of which informed by the heightened mixed-race consciousness.

Introduction

In Race and Mixed Race, Naomi Zack writes:

Racial identities must be based on racial identifications because the ordinary concept of race is a cultural artifact that varies from place to place and time to time. There is nothing in the nature of consciousness or the phenomenology of human bodily experience which, in the absence of external identification, can constitute a racial identity. Racial identities therefore come after racial identifications.¹

Zack’s slightly dry philosophical inquiry highlights the key to the construct of race, namely, that race may well be a process of self-identification, but one that corresponds largely to external, social dictates placed on the individual. Put simply, race does not exist in the abstract; one needs to be raced. Such external imposition usually comes about, alas, as a result of racial prejudice. Surely in a democratic and multiethnic society, awareness of one’s race arises at times through more benign reminders, cloaked as ethnicity in terms of ethnic food, ethnic costume, ethnic neighbourhood, ethnic heritage, and what not. However, in the Western world dominated by whites, whose skin colour and privilege are rendered, as George Lipsitz puts it, invisible,² minorities are

most intensely raced during occasions of subtle exclusions or outright discriminations. People of colour are those whom, to rephrase Jean-Paul Sartre’s definition of Jews in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1948), others define as non-whites. Sartre’s wisdom of hindsight derives, to some degree, from the devastation of the Holocaust. A Holocaust survivor who incarnates Sartre’s observation is Jean Améry, who asserts: ‘Antisemitism, which made a Jew of me, may be a form of madness; that is not what is in question here. Whether it is a madness or not, it is in any event a historical and social fact. I was, after all, really in Auschwitz and not in Himmler’s imagination.’

Painstakingly in *At the Mind’s Limits* (1980), Améry pinpoints the exact moments when his Jewishness is revealed, or rather, imposed on him from without. A well-assimilated German Jew (an ‘ethnic’ German in today’s lingo?) in 1935, Améry recalls the rude awakening to his racial identity when ‘sitting over a newspaper in a Vienna coffeehouse’ and ‘studying the Nuremberg Laws.’ The Nuremberg Laws constitute the inception of what Améry describes as ‘the necessity and impossibility of being a Jew,’ which I borrow to suggest, like Jews, the predicament of existence of the mixed race lodged between two cultures and two racial categories.

To outsiders, mixed-race existence, the difficulty personified in many an Amerasian’s facial features, is indeed hard to capture. The conundrum of a face, a spectator’s initial impulse is to dissect the face in such a way as to pinpoint the Asianness of, say, the eyes and the hair colour and the Americanness of, say, the nose and the skin tone. Human nature dictates that one absorbs new and potentially unclassifiable existences into established categories. In so doing, an Amerasian face is forced to disintegrate into either-or polarities; it is de-faced, erased, becoming a blank for cut-and-paste out of two opposing repertoires of stereotypes.

The chapter title implies a focus on ‘being’ or ‘existence,’ which needs to be qualified at the outset. All three philosophical references above point to the same movement, existentialism, thus creating the impression that existentialist consideration of the mixed race is of supreme importance. After all, Zack opens her book with six chapters of ‘Existential Analysis.’ Sartre embodied the culmination of existentialism which included towering figure such as Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel. (Améry was so deeply influenced by the postwar French ethos that he changed his German name from Hans Maier.) However, this is not a

‘people who left Europe as Calabrians or Bohemians’ into ‘something called “whites” when they got to America and […] that designation made all the difference in the world’ (p.370).


4 Améry, p.85
philosophical treatise. The Sartrean ontological arguments as in the monumental *Being and Nothing* (1954) are of interest only insofar as they shed light on Amerasian expressions. The same is true of the existential psychology associated with Rollo May and others. This relative nonchalance with respect to existentialist positions derives largely from the time lapse between the postwar philosophical movement and the *fin-de-siecle* racial identity politics: mixed-race Asian Americans are either blasé about or utterly oblivious to the long tradition of reflection on ‘Being.’ Such an attitude is even reflected in the only philosopher expounding on the mixed race. Zack in ‘On Being and Not-Being Black and Jewish’ articulates minimally the theory of being either, neither, or both of the two groups.\(^5\) Instead, she reiterates the black-Jewish relationship since their collaboration during the civil rights era down to recent antagonism as a result of affirmative action, Afrocentrism, and Zionism. Zack concludes her piece thusly: ‘[A]lthough the existential limbo of not-being both black and Jewish, for someone who has both identities, may evoke emptiness and isolation at times and not be enthusiastically received by blacks or Jews, it does no harm to them or to the mixed person.’\(^6\) The sentiment is patently existentialist in terms of the analogy of a ‘limbo’ evoking ‘emptiness and isolation,’ but the historicist approach tracing ethnic tensions aligns more closely with contemporary debates on identity politics.

Zack’s writings, nonetheless, contextualize the discussion on Asian American mixed race within racial mixing in the United States. Werner Sollors in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* chronicles, among other themes, the ‘Tragic Mulatto,’ a stereotypical character of black and white parentage.\(^7\) Laura Browder’s *Slippery Characters* zooms in on ‘ethnic impersonators,’ some of whom are tragic mulattoes.\(^8\) Elaine K. Ginsberg’s edited collection, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, explores the similar phenomenon of passing.\(^9\) Native American writers oftentimes feature mixed-bloods in their works. For instance, Leslie Marmon Silko entrusts hope for renewal in mixed-race characters in *Ceremony* (1977). Hispanic writers, furthermore, evince confluences of American Indian, European, African, and other races. Had

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\(^7\) Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).


Sollors adopted a more comparative ethnic approach, this thematic genealogy could be expanded into the Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American corpus. That said, the paradoxical negation and affirmation in Sollors’s title suggests the true nature of interraciality, one that, by corollary, highlights the fluidity and constructed-ness of race, which is, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it, the ‘ultimate’ trope used in marking difference.¹⁰

An inherent danger lurks within the mixed race movement as a result. While a push for collective racial identity with regard to peoples of colour may be justified politically, this desire rests ultimately on a pool of vanishing quicksand. The construct must erect itself as much on theoretical as on experiential grounds, and yet that lived experience often stems from negation, of being othered. The quandary of existence for the mixed race in Asian American literary history is, therefore, an acrobatic feat to stand still on the tight rope and not cross it, a Sisyphean rock balancing on the tip of the mountain. This accounts for the fact that even when mixed-race characters materialize out of general neglect, they function less in the utopian sliver of space called mixed race than in the dystopian racist climates of either of the two cultures of origin. The meaning of the mixed race lies in its disappearance into one or the other race, at the moment of racial discrimination. To look back at literary expressions by mixed-race Asian Americans, three nodes of convergence emerge: The Eaton sisters around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century; the undying genre of interracial romance which I call ‘lomansu’; the multiracial movement since the 1970s and the stage productions informed by the heightened mixed-race consciousness.

The Eatons

The social pressures on the mixed race of Asian and Western ancestry as well as the reactions to such pressures result, first of all, in diametrically opposed strategies of the Eaton sisters. Writing around the turn of the century in the context of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the various anti-miscegenation laws, the Nativist movement in North America, the Gentleman’s Agreement with Japan in 1907-08, and other historical factors, the Eaton sisters, of Chinese and British parentage and spending their entire lives in Britain, Canada, the United States, and Jamaica, adopt strategic essentializing, of passing as Asian. The elder sister, Edith Maude Eaton, assumed the Chinese

alter ego of ‘Sui Sin Far,’ focusing on the Chinese working-class communities on the West Coast in her fiction and championing their causes in her journalistic output. Sui manifests a combativeness against white hegemony, heralding the third node of convergence in the multiracials. The younger sister, Winnifred Lillie Eaton, posing as the Japanese ‘Onoto Watanna,’ opts for more exotic and Orientalist portrayals in her romances. In comparison to Sui’s activist stance, Watanna’s penchant for love stories befits the second node of ‘lomansu.’

Sui’s autobiographical ‘Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian’ in Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Stories (1912) reveals that her self-identification as Chinese is the consequence of white rejection. 11 Childhood memories such as ‘I wouldn’t speak to Sui if I were you. Her mama is Chinese’ (Sui 216) and ‘Chinky, Chinky, Chinaman, yellow-face, pig-tail, rat-eater’ (Sui 219) lead the author to conclude that ‘the cross of the Eurasian bore too heavily upon my childish shoulders’ (Sui 221). Evidently, an Eurasian is reduced to ‘Chinese’ and frowned upon, but the figure of speech of the crucifix connotes Sui’s Western, Christian identity. The flat-out denial by the white society in the face of such Christian background pushes her to identify with Chinese immigrants, whose misery strikes a chord in her. Her story ‘Its Wavering Image,’ for example, depicts the ‘half white, half Chinese’ (Sui 61) Pan as choosing to be Chinese, ignoring her suitor Mark Carson who deems her white. Similarly in her ‘Mental Portfolio,’ Sui relates how she comes to be accepted by Chinatown residents: ‘Some little woman discovered that I have Chinese hair, color of eyes and complexion’ (Sui 227). The attribution of physical characteristics of the self to the other usually signals the beginning of any relationship. Despite this admirable commitment to the ghetto dwellers, Sui has also internalized social discrimination to the extent that she exhibits self-hate in maintaining that the ‘white blood’ in herself battles with and tries to rein in the Chinese blood. Paul R. Spickard laments that Sui is ‘always more on the white side than the Chinese, in relation to where she lived and worked, who her friends were, and the point of view from which she wrote’ (Sui 49). As accurate as this assessment may sound, Sui’s alleged ‘complicity’ with white hegemony has to be contextualized in its times, especially the pressure on ethnic writers. For instance, ‘Mental Portfolio’ concedes that at one point, she was advised to “trade” upon my nationality. They tell me if I wish to succeed in literature in America I should dress in Chinese costume, carry a fan in my hand, wear a pair of scarlet beaded slippers, live in New York, and come of high birth’ (Sui 230). A racial posturing deemed a ‘betrayal,’ Sui scorns it as beneath

her. Her younger sister, however, has been more mercurial with respect to her identity.

Multiplying the plot of *Madame Butterfly*, Onoto Watanna in *Miss Nume of Japan* (1899) orchestrates a pair of interracial romances, which end tragicomically, with one marriage and three suicides. The spurned Japanese male, along with his father and the father of his Japanese intended, commits *seppuku* out of disgrace. Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* can be retroactively projected onto Watanna to account for her use of the stereotype of Oriental schizophrenia: obsessive aestheticism and death-wish. Painting the Japanese in broad strokes, this either-or binarism hollows out the other’s subjectivity. As a consequence, the Japanese are either the fastidious, innocent, English-mangling Nume (Plum blossom) or her inscrutable, suicidal betrothed. Orientals are depicted as stiff automatons by means of their alienating pidgin and their polarized behaviour, one which dangles between exterior tranquillity and impetuous outbursts. The Japanese male protagonist is said at one point to behold the coquette Cleo Ballard ‘with the unreadable quiet gaze peculiar to the better class Japanese’ (Watanna, *Miss* 12), which betrays no trace of his longing for Cleo but which eventually brings about the triple suicides. A mixed race novelist like Watanna essentializes Oriental characters,bestowing them with sharp psychic rifts, denying them the range of emotions which make human human. Watanna’s *The Heart of Hyacinth* (1903) follows the exact Orientalist formula. In 1914, Watanna lent her illustrious Japanese façade to spice up *Chinese-Japanese Cook Book*. A year after the cook book, Watanna published, anonymously, *Me: A Book of Remembrance*, which chronicles the life of a seventeen-year-old ‘working-girl’ with aspirations for writing and her involvement with various male acquaintances. An inherent contradiction exists between the title’s suggestion of autobiography and the author’s anonymity. Another striking characteristic of *Me* is that it suppresses any reference to her Asian mother, who is simply described as ‘foreign.’ A new chapter in her lifelong play with mixed-race identity, Watanna now conceals what she had consistently flaunted in her turn-of-the-century interracial romances. A decade later, Watanna reincarnates herself as Winnifred Eaton Reeve in her Canadian Western novels. *Cattle* (1924) and *His Royal Nibs* (1925) deal with Canadian cowboys roaming across the prairie of Alberta, Canada. Despite the cameo appearance of the ranch owner’s ‘half-witted illegitimate son,’ his ‘half-breed’ with an American

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Indian woman, Watanna exorcized her Oriental self in the 1920s as completely as she embraced it years before.

**Lomansu**

The Eaton sisters are pioneers for mixed-race Asian American writers. Onoto Watanna’s flirting with race, in particular in her interracial romances, foreshadows the whole genre of ‘lomansu’ far more precisely than Sui’s combative stance for minority rights. That the mixed-race writers seem to favour romance springs initially from personal reasons. Each of these writers comes into being as a result of partnership across racial lines in the parents’ generation or before and hence seeks to explore what appears to mark out his/her existence – mixed-race heritage. This leads mixed-race writers to deploy the genre of romance in retracing their ancestors’ transgression against the taboo of miscegenation as well as their struggles with culture clashes, all in the name of love, which is the case with all the writers examined herein, principally Diana Chang, Han Suyin, and Aimee E. Liu. While the playwrights Velina Hasu Houston and D. (or Dmae) Roberts also stage romances, their medium of theatre and their affinity with the multiracial movement justify considering their works in the third node of convergence.

‘Lomansu’ dominates the long stretch of literary history, spanning the Eaton years, postwar, cold war, civil rights era, and down to the present time. Interracial eroticism as a literary motif endures throughout different periods, including the 1960s and 70s with the high level of ethnic consciousness. American readers’ proclivity toward such taboo subjects as racial mixing sugar-coated in melodrama governs the contours of other minority experiences as well. Sollors asserts that:

> Generally, eighteenth-century interracial texts seem to focus more on black-white couplings: odes to a black Venus; the slave who falls in love with a white woman – not on the descendants of such unions. [...] In stories of children of mixed couples, the Mulatto may simply play the same role that a black woman might also have played. When the literary focus is on the Mulattoes’ background, it is their slave descent, not racial mixing, that commands attention. [14]

What is described as the pattern for eighteenth-century texts holds true for twentieth-century Asian American writings on ‘lomansu.’ Sollors goes on to say that ‘literary conventions that have been labelled “Tragic Mulatto” would

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14 Sollors, p.239; emphasis original.
seem to be more appropriately called melodramatic.'¹⁵ Sollors facetiously redefines ‘Tragic Mulatto’ as ‘Warring Blood Melodrama.’¹⁶

Mixed-race stories under review do tend to lapse into stylized boy-meets-girl-and-fall-in-love narratives, even at a time when root searching, as Alex Haley premiers in the 1970s, is paramount to identity formation. The existential limbo of the mixed race is elided amidst the dogged pursuit of family history in the mode of romance. It is quite telling that this reconstruction invariably halts at the precise moment of the rise of the mixed race. Even when a mixed-race protagonist eventually materializes in Aimee E. Liu’s *Face* (1994), she quickly dissolves into one or the other race, never inhabiting the utopian sliver of space called the mixed race. In fact, Orientalist stereotypes are so spontaneously marshalled that romance becomes, as racist pidgin has it, ‘lomansu,’ with the proverbial confusion of ‘r’ and ‘l’ and with the hard-sounding suffix in place of the consonant ‘s.’ The pidgin spelling brings forth mixed race writers’ collusion with the representation of the minority practiced by the hegemony, despite the intention of such romances to undermine cultural and racial stereotypes.

In the vein of Watanna’s tales of love, Diana Chang, born of a Chinese father and an Eurasian mother, sets the three Eurasian protagonists of *The Frontiers of Love* (1956) in the foreign concessions of Shanghai, ‘a Eurasian city,’¹⁷ during the Japanese occupation of World War II. Chang injects a considerable dosage of politics and history into her story for the sake of heightening romance. The three protagonists are situated at different axes of race. The voluptuous Mimi longs to marry Robert Bruno, who rejects her because she is Eurasian. Mimi then turns masochistic, giving herself to any Western suitor. Feng Huang, on the other hand, spies for the Communist in order to reaffirm his Chineseness. Feng’s zeal to deny his half-Western heritage is such that he is willing to give up his lover, Sylvia Chen, the third and final Eurasian character. The lovers drift apart also because Sylvia’s Chinese cousin, Peiyuan, dies indirectly because of Feng’s involvement with the Communists. All three live in the relative comfort of foreign concessions, which makes the romance and sentimentality rather out of place amidst massive suffering in the final days of World War II. One is also left with the lingering question as to how the book comes to chart the ‘frontiers of love’ when some of the most worn romantic episodes are depicted.

Compared to Chang, another mixed-race writer, Han of Chinese and Belgian parentage, may boast of a longer, albeit rather repetitive, publishing career. The cold war tension makes a bestseller out of Han’s timely *A Many-

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¹⁵ Sollors, p.243.
¹⁶ Sollors, p.243.
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Splendored Thing (1952) set in Hong Kong and China, which is turned into a 1955 movie, Love is a Many-Splendored Thing, with William Holden and Jennifer Jones as Dr. Han Suyin. Subsequently, the TV series, Love is a Many Splendored Thing, runs from 1967-73. In the original romance, Dr. Han Suyin, an autobiographical-fictionalized protagonist, is a Eurasian who thinks of herself as Chinese. Safe in Hong Kong at the historical juncture of the ascent of Red China, Han is, nevertheless, eager to return to China to serve the people. Living with missionaries and insulated from Hong Kong’s dire poverty, Han launches political harangues and melodramatic love cries. Mainstream Western audience who revisit this particular romance in its myriad reincarnations throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s are most likely teased by the ‘hologram’ of a Eurasian. Hence, Mark Elliot, played by the overbearing Holden, falls in love with a Jennifer Jones who plays a Eurasian who believes herself to be Chinese. One female body is made to mutate into a triplet – Western, Eurasian, and Chinese. Like Sui’s secret white love, Han, despite the overt claim of devotion to China, idolizes the British colonists. Such contradictory signal reconfirms the superiority of the West. A paradox seems to exist between Han’s fervent Chinese nationalism and, in Frantz Fanon’s terms, her need for ‘colonization of the mind.’ Both polarities, however, may stem from the ‘prejudice against mixed bloods’ mentioned in passing. The deep ambivalence and insecurity of an Eurasian are suppressed by way of impassioned embrace of external entities.

Han’s debut is followed by a long list of exotic romances. And the Rain My Drink (1956) unfolds in Malaya; The Mountain is Young (1958) takes place in India; and The Enchantress (1985) moves further afield to the eighteenth-century France with a Western protagonist. On the other hand, Han’s volumes of self-promoting autobiography over the years depict her ties with Communist Chinese leaders. Indeed, these volumes’ inserted photographs of Han with Chou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng, and others prove beyond doubt that Han has been one of the pivotal Communist apologists during the Maoist years and after. Han has been so influential in Communist China’s public relations campaign that even a contemporary writer, Jo-hsi Chen, refers to her in the collection of short stories, The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1978). In Chen’s trademark understated, ironic style, the protagonist in ‘Keng Erh in Peking’ takes a tour up the spectacular Li River near Kweilin, only to have the motor of his tour boat given to Han Suyin’s

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18 See Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. by Charles Lam Markham (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1982).
stranded boat, so that the distinguished ‘foreign visitor’\textsuperscript{20} can proceed with her travel of the motherland.

A Eurasian character like the protagonist in \textit{A Many-Splendored Thing} never seems to reappear in Han’s corpus. Her 1982 \textit{Till Morning Comes} utilizes the genre of interracial romance. An idealized love story between Jen Yong and Stephanie Ryder, it is as melodramatic and maudlin as any dime novel. Similar to the use of white protagonists in the films \textit{Dances with Wolves} (1990) and \textit{The Last of the Mohicans} (1992) to make possible the sympathy of mainstream audience for Native American plight, Stephanie becomes a lens through which Chinese history and suffering are laid out for Western readers. A white sinophile, Stephanie is delineated as an insider of Chineseness, helping to bridge China with the United States.\textsuperscript{21} Stephanie belongs to a long line of fictitious ‘observers’ of the East, often outfitted as (photo)journalists, diplomats, artists, writers, mountain-climbers, or adventurers of various stripes.\textsuperscript{22}

Nearly a century after the Eaton sisters, Aimee E. Liu, who hails with a quarter of Chinese blood, is another mixed race romance writer. The protagonist Maibelle in Liu’s \textit{Face} (1994) is nicknamed ‘Mei-be’ to highlight her ambiguous, mixed race status. Maibelle returns to her roots in Chinatown and modern Chinese history, only to find that her roots are the source of her recurring nightmares. She rediscovers, in horror, her father’s wartime photographs in China as well as her own rape by Chinatown gang called the Boxers. Just as her father tries to forget about the atrocities he documented for \textit{Life}, Maibelle blocks out the trauma perpetrated against her by immigrant thugs organized by Lao Li and Tommy Wah, her biological grandfather and her husband-to-be. Maibelle’s amnesia and nightmares are eventually healed in her acceptance of past ordeal and future bliss with Tommy Wah. Yet even in this return of a redheaded and blue-eye ‘native,’ the representation of Chineseness remains stereotypically dichotomized: the demonic Chinatown gang and the domestic happiness awaiting her. Ambivalence continues to permeate this romantic coming to terms with ethnic heritage.

It is somewhat unnerving to learn from Liu’s autobiographical \textit{Solitaire} (1979) that the rape in \textit{Face} is loosely based on Liu’s trauma at the age of


\textsuperscript{21} Han also tries, in the fashion of a good liberal Democrat, to balance political persecution in China and in America. The Maoist movements are compared to the Red Scare under McCarthyism.

\textsuperscript{22} See Robert G. Lee’s \textit{Orientals: Asian American in Popular Culture} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), especially his discussion on \textit{The Year of the Dragon}. The 1982 film casts the female lead as an Asian American female journalist, a profession granted to this particular minority due to Connie Chung and the image of depersonalized, easily programmed model minority.
seven in the hands of two apparently Caucasian friends. Throughout Liu’s puberty years, as recorded in *Solitaire*, her association with sexual intercourse has always been ‘that evening with Cliff and Dick’ which ‘made me shudder.’

Liu’s relationship with her boyfriend Ken at Yale appears to be irreparably marred due to that ordeal as well. During their love-making, a frigid Liu invariably sees ‘visions of the attic where Cliff and Dick played horse with me’ (Liu, *Solitaire* 195). Yet the fictional rape fifteen years later is Sinologized – a rape by China, if you will. In a novel purportedly devoted to the homecoming of an ethnic passing as white, Liu exploits racist stereotypes of the Yellow Peril through associations with the Boxer rebellion. Racial hatred is subtly manipulated to augment the shock and repulsiveness of the rape. When memory of the assault finally returns to Maibelle after years of repression and the consequent nightmares, the transgression is bracketed by two Chinese curse words in italicized *pinyin*, thus underscoring its alieness.

Liu’s corpus to date suggests that individual’s racial and ethnic identity gradually evolves in relation to culture. The overnight sensation of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* in 1976 has encouraged many Asian American writers and artists to, in Kingston’s words, ‘claim America’ by, I suspect, claiming Asia. To be taken as authentically American, it requires Asian Americans to paradoxically reconstruct an Asian lineage. The revisiting of Asian ancestry in Liu, for instance, takes place not in her autobiography but in her subsequent fictions. The ethnic void in Liu’s life

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must be fictionalized. *Solitaire* is an account of Liu’s teenage anorexia, a wide-spread pathology among teenage girls striving for that Twiggy look since the 1970s. Mixed parentage only surfaces in reference to her father and Liu’s occasional musings as to her thwarted model career: ‘There are all sorts of excuses – I’m not blond, tall, or American, or on the other hand, I’m not Oriental enough either’ (Liu, *Solitaire* 114). *Face* is an ambivalent return to her ethnicity, which is visually represented through the six photographs of New York Chinatown at the opening of each of the six parts. *Cloud Mountain* (1997), on the other hand, falls squarely in the genre of historical romance in re-imagining the love between characters allegedly based on Liu’s grandparents.25

A magisterial work of nearly six hundred pages, complete with a chronology of events in China from 1840 to 1949, *Cloud Mountain* is a historical romance, meticulously researched and crafted, bringing alive the San Francisco Bay area as well as certain pockets of China – primarily foreign concessions in Shanghai and Beijing – toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century. To augment the sense of authenticity, Liu even interweaves prominent historical figures with fictitious characters. As a consequence, Hope rescues Paul from the hands of Mikhail Borodin, the Soviet advisor to Sun Yat-sen, and Hope attends the feminist lectures of Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood. Granted that the scope of representation of China is severely limited as in most Western gazes of China, Liu, nonetheless, has vividly carved out a segment of China based on research and imagination.

Liu in *Cloud Mountain* forgoes the hip, disjointed style of *Face* and adopts a restrained and understated style, one which is decidedly old-fashioned, even Victorian. With all its chance encounters and, most importantly, the opening impasse of who to marry, one cannot help recalling Jane Austen. But Liu deviates from the Austen tradition early on by introducing the theme of interracial romance between Hope Newfield and Paul Leon, originally known as Liang Po-yu. Making love to the hairless body of an Asian man is, according to Hope’s female friend, like making love to a child. Miscegenation becomes pedophilia, hence accentuating the taboo. Just at the point of accepting her Caucasian suitor’s hand, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake shakes Hope out of life’s complacency and she marries her student and rescuer Paul instead, despite his stilted English and awkward mannerism. Reacting to the xenophobic climate in the United States and China, the couple Anglicize or Sinologize each other in the public eye. Hope not only gives Paul an American first name but proposes to Hispanicize his last name on the marriage certificate. Likewise, in letters to his mother in

China, Paul presents Hope in a Sinophile light: ‘slender like a Han, with natural lotus feet. Her hair is black as ebony, her skin as pale as the plum blossom’ (Liu, *Cloud* 130). Such strategies for survival by racial passing notwithstanding, racist infringement on their marriage persists unabated throughout the fiction. After having given birth to many children in China, Hope is particularly sensitized to the state of ‘mongrels’ and ‘Eurasians.’ Perceived as individual transgressiveness, mixed race marriages and progeny are subjected to inordinate social pressure. Race in Liu’s novel is not defined in an essentialist fashion; race is defined by racism on both sides of the Pacific.

The narrative unfolds through the eyes of the heroine Hope. Hope is a daring early feminist, venturing to embrace a ‘Chinaman’ and China. Compared to the complex and evolving personality of Hope’s, Paul is but a cardboard character in the vein of Maibelle’s Chinese father in *Face*. It is ironic that while Hope summarizes her life’s work in the epilogue as ‘My job is – always was – to demystify my Chinese ally. My husband. My lover. My past’ (Liu, *Cloud* 563), Paul and China remain as enigmatic as ever, as though the riveting details of aliens and their land are presented to merely underscore their alien-ness. Paul is consistently portrayed as either a resigned fatalist or an unstable lunatic. In between these extremes, Paul suppresses his emotions to the extent that he appears to be impassive, even disinterested. Whenever Paul finds himself trapped, he utters the refrain ‘mei fatse’ (‘Nothing to be done’), which Hope takes to be ‘China’s fatal mantra.’ At such moments, Paul’s voice is described as ‘flat,’ his face ‘as passive and accommodating as a blank slate, and the words, still bright on his lips, seemed to rise of their own accord’ – a picture of automatons or, of course, Orientals (Liu, *Cloud* 141). The fatalist attitude leads to what Hope perceives to be Paul’s ultimate disgrace in kneeling to his mother for forgiveness. The other extreme of Paul’s personality surfaces when he turns hopping mad at the apprehension of a thief. Mysteriously, Paul begins ‘flailing his own cheeks, bringing tears to his eyes,’ a slapstick behaviour so Chaplinesque and absurdly masochistic that it comes to scar the father’s image in the children’s mind as much as ‘her [Hope’s] own memory of Paul prostrating himself for his mother’ (Liu, *Cloud* 449-50). Paul’s regression to Orientalist clichés completes itself when he becomes withdrawn and conservative after surviving the Kuomingtang (Nationalist) white terror. But the incident has so unnerved Paul that he carries, from that point on, ‘the thick, sickly-sweet smell of opium on his clothing.’ Their relationship has deteriorated to the extent that Hope says that Paul ‘sickens me. I pitied him. I hated him’ (Liu, *Cloud* 531). Not only is the individual Orientalized, but the land is exoticized as well. Hope generalizes her Chinese experiences toward the end of the story: ‘How easily truth and deceit are exchanged in this land of mirrors!’
Sheng-mei Ma

(Liu, Cloud 428), thus echoing Orson Welles’s ‘House of Mirrors’ at the conclusion of his film noir thriller Lady from Shanghai (1948).

For practitioners of lomansu – Chang, Han, and Liu –, the retracing of ancestral miscegenation may be undertaken for good reason, but may ultimately dodge the issue of their mixed-race identity. As Laura Browder writes in the Introduction to her Slippery Characters, ‘[w]hile ethnic impersonators may free themselves from the historical trap of an unwanted identity by passing into a new one, their success rests on their ability to manipulate stereotypes, thus further miring their audience in essentialist racial and ethnic categories.’26 ‘Lomansu’ as a genre, in the way prosecuted by the three writers, succumbs to a schizophrenic schematization of the mixed race. Rather than envisioning the mixed-race self, they choose to ‘pass’ as the other – their parents or grandparents, and rather formulaically at that. Passing, as noted by Judith Butler of Nella Larson’s Passing (1929),27 denotes not only the crossing of racial lines but also death, death to the mixed-race consciousness.

Multiracial

Concurrent with the production of Watanna-esque lomansu, a multiracial movement which magnifies Sui’s combativeness gathers momentum in the aftermath of the civil rights era and, in particular, since the late 1970s campaign launched by mixed-race Americans for the addition of the box of ‘multiracial’ in the form used by the U. S. Bureau of Census. The multiracial movement arises out of a discontent with racial categories stipulated by Directive 15 of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in 1977, in which five racial groups are established: white, black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Hispanic. In addition to census forms, public schools are another battleground, where the absurd ‘eyeball test’ is instituted to determine school children’s race.

The political struggle is a revolt from deep within the disenfranchised mixed-race experiences. Within the academe, this offensive of the mixed race is spearheaded by social scientists in the fields of psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology. And it is intriguing that in disciplines where researchers are trained to at least appear to be objective and impersonal, almost every single piece of mixed-race writing begins with some personal stories or photographs of the mixed-race author. This

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26 Browder, p.10.
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autobiographical genesis permeates social sciences studies on the mixed race. In response to the fact that, as Theresa Kay Williams puts it in ‘Race as Process,’ a ‘biracial person has often been portrayed as confused, lost, and homeless’, a mixed-race psychologist such as Maria P. P. Root boldly submits ‘A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,’ which opens with the right not to justify mixed-race existence to the world. This volume, The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier, that has such a self-assertive foundation, concludes with Christine C. Iijima Hall’s look into the future. Hall maintains in ‘2001: A Race Odyssey’ that such a journey first ventures to discover ‘where we came from’ and she urges that the mixed-race people endeavour to juggle ‘simultaneous membership’ or ‘multiple fluid identities’ or ‘situational identity.’ Far from the historical ‘passing,’ Hall advocates not passing into existing racial categories and not having to choose one over the other of the mixed-race heritage.

The efforts of social scientists in the academe reflect a grass-roots insurrection against simplistic racial constructs. Masses of multiracial Americans, particularly the young, simply wish to assert their right of existence, thus the push for the revision of the form used by the U. S. Census Bureau. Hence, young multiracial interviewed in Pearl Fuyo Gaskins’s What Are You? Voices of Mixed Race Young People cling on to their own identity and refuse to be categorized. Fifteen-year-old Derek Salmond of black and white parentage responds to people’s query of ‘So what are you anyway?’ by saying ‘I’m a human being [...] What are you?’ By the same token, a young woman who is half black and half Japanese maintains that ‘I am Blackanese.’ The mixed-race groundswell of discontent is best summed up by the lead poem of What Are You? entitled ‘ME’ penned by the biracial and adopted poet Sara Busdieker. ‘ME’ is an eloquent response to the annoying question of ‘What Are You Anyway?’, which turns out to be a recurring motif in mixed-race writings. The poet’s assertion that ‘I’m mixed, but I’m not mixed up’ is yet another refrain in social scientists and artists’ forays into mixed-

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race experiences. After a litany of negations, Busdieker arrays the fluidity of her identity in the concluding stanza:

I’m a black + white + I don’t know what else = 
Both/neither/other, ‘half’ transracially adopted, 
Descendant of people I’ve never met. A freckled, 
Brown-skinned, curly/straight/frizzy brown-haired 
(with some black, blond, and orange thrown in), 
German-American raised, Spanish-speaking gringa 
and multicolorful part-time expatriate. I’m mixed. 
What I am is ME.  

True to Hall’s dictum on the mixed race, Busdieker makes no choice among racial divisions. If anything, she teases the public with infinite possibilities, so much so that certain alleged attributes of the ‘me’ appear to be mere poses, role-playing. The most obvious posturing lies in the closure through a census form’s checked box, a graphic and politicized footnote to the abstract ME.


This upbeat sentiment is likewise shared by the Afro-Japanese playwright Velina Hasu Houston: ‘What I am is “whole” Japanese and “whole” American.’ Such a self-assertiveness suggests the much-ameliorated racial climate in which multiracials find themselves.

Liberal critics of the multiracial movement since the late 1970s are alarmed, however, by the mirage of racial equality. Jon Michael Spencer in The New Colored People: The Mixed-Race Movement in America compares the objective of the multiracialist movement in the U.S. to the grouping of ‘coloureds’ in South Africa’s apartheid. Viewing the formation of the coloured in South African history as a white strategy to drive a wedge between blacks and other peoples of colour, Spencer warns against the multiracialist movement, which threatens to sunder a fragile minority solidarity. A political pragmatist, Spencer insists that:

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34 Qtd. in Spickard, p.151.
The acceptance of the ‘one drop rule’ by black people [...] was more than merely a passive internalizing of the system of oppression fashioned by the powerful [...]. Unable to escape from racial labeling, blacks chose to wield race for their liberation by nurturing a sense of common identity and then fashioning unified social and political action.\textsuperscript{35}

One suspects that while Spencer remains at the stage of ‘wield[ing] race for their liberation,’ the mixed-race philosopher Zack tries to, on a theoretical plane, deconstruct the notion of race, resulting in diametrically opposed ideas on mixed race. In addition, Spencer’s call for black unity conveniently erases the mixed race of other minority groups. Is, for instance, an Amerasian of black and Asian descent to identify himself or herself as black as well? If one does not, then one runs the risk of incurring black wrath, such as what had happened to the professional golfer Tiger Woods shortly after having pronounced his preference for a mixed race identity on The Oprah Winfrey Show in the mid-1990s.

In ‘Made in the U.S.A.: Racial Mixing ‘n Matching,’ David Theo Goldberg also rejects the multiracialist agenda, but he bases his argument on more theoretical grounds. Goldberg first of all points out the hypocrisy of multicultural America by pouncing on the computer-generated ‘The New Face of America,’ the cover image of \textit{Time}’s special fall 1993 issue. Goldberg then maps out his dissatisfaction with the term ‘mixed race’ because it ‘may seem to capture in the most adequate fashion prevailing demographic heterogeneity, but it does so only by silently fix[ing] in place the racializing project. It naturalizes racial assumption, marking mixed-ness as an aberrant condition, as transgressive, and at the extreme as purity polluting.’\textsuperscript{36}

What Goldberg views as revalidating race is to Zack a subversion of race. Coming in the wake of four doctoral dissertations in the 1980s on ‘Asian-descent multiracial peoples’ and Root’s 1992 edited collection \textit{Racially Mixed People in America},\textsuperscript{37} Zack attempts in \textit{Race and Mixed Race} to demolish the concept of ‘Race’ with that of ‘Mixed Race.’ Harking back to the Harlem Renaissance whereby black identity is constructed, Zack notes that many African American leaders in this movement are themselves mixed race, such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, and Jean Toomer. If the cultural movement is spearheaded by people of mixed race, then it eerily


doubles back to W. E. B. Du Bois’s idea of the ‘Talented Tenth,’ composed in large part of a ‘mulatto elite.’ Indeed, even early black leaders like Frederick Douglass, Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington are biracial. Zack comments on the heritage of the Harlem Renaissance in uniting blacks of various origin under one designation, hence de facto acquiescing to the one-drop rule:

Much was gained in black pride, culture, achievement [...] What was lost was the concept of mixed race as a theoretical wedge against racism and against the concept of physical race – the new combined black community threw away any effective intellectual weapon against American racial designations, which is to say, against the core of American racism.

Complimentary to Zack’s philosophical reasoning, Carol Roh Spaulding adopts in ‘The Go-Between People’ a more positivistic approach in retrieving mixed race characters in literature. Spaulding contends that people of mixed blood lack a history and subjectivity. Often they are merged into specific ethnic groups: a mulatta becomes part of the African American discourse; a Eurasian part of the Asian American discourse. To fill their absence, Spaulding calls for ‘a truly comprehensive examination of literary depictions of the mixed blood,’ including ‘the mulatto and mulatta, the Eurasian, the half-blood Indian, the mestizo and mestiza, and those who identify themselves as part Jewish.’ Spaulding concludes her essay by celebrating those mixed race characters in fiction who manifest ‘a refusal of biologically and culturally based designations altogether – and an acceptance of the lived consequences of this deliberate practice,’ culminating in such utopian visions as Gloria Anzaldúa’s ‘the mixing of “bloods” and cultures will create a new consciousness, a “cosmic race.”’

Anzaldúa’s heaven, nevertheless, is founded on an ugly reality: ‘The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture.’ For a border scab to heal and transform into a synecdoche of a colour-blind world requires more than a poet’s vivid imagination. Even Anzaldúa’s poetic language cited above betrays the Shangri-la of a ‘cosmic race’ toward the end of her book. The mestiza writer draws her imageries for

38 Zack, Race, p.95.
39 Zack, Race, p.97.
41 Spaulding, p.110.
42 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), p.3.
racial conflicts from the body, in particular blood, hence duplicating ancient beliefs of race. The expression of ‘flesh and blood,’ of course, suggests in a highly passionate manner family lineage. This emotional appeal of ‘blood’ can be extended to a whole group of people, such as in ‘a red-blooded American.’ By contrast, mixed race is described in metaphors of pollution; ‘half-blood’ intimates that the other half is dubious in origin. Blood, nonetheless, is always red and genetic shufflings among races never result in neat percentages implied in words like ‘mulatto’ or ‘quadroon.’ The imprecise nature of ‘blood’ in racial matters fits, however, the goals of nation-building in modern history. The essentialist view regards nation-state as consisting of a homogeneous race, which is cast as an inviolable human body. The abrasions against alien bodies produce blood, the ‘essence’ of race, for blood not only means life (heart) but it is contained within the body. Any leakage of this fluid portends danger. How is one to resolve the contradiction between the pain of bleeding or racial mixing and the euphoria of racelessness in Anzaldúa, between the violence and the vision? In point of fact, the raceless paradise is not born out by mixed-race Asian American writers, who, rather than reaching for an iconoclastic consciousness, dress up the border scab in banalities that I call ‘lomansu.’

I must note again that liberal critics’ sophisticated theoretical speculations – either Spencer’s fear of a weakened black solidarity, or Zack’s intention of demolishing racism through the mixed race, or Anzaldúa’s ‘cosmic race’ – bear tangentially on the masses of young multiracial Americans, who exhibit a resistance to see collective, cultural meanings in their personal lives, who prefer to stay on a romanticized individual level. For young multiracials, their earnest and well-deserved search for identity is undergirded by a belief, justified or not, that they are no longer defined by race and that they can even play and subvert race. The multiracials’ gesture of their new identity is tinged with, paradoxically, idealism and wishful-thinking, the result of a more harmonious, open attitude toward race among metropolitan middle-class. A probationary move of ‘the haves,’ one awaits the day when it finally trickles down to ‘the other half,’ like economic prosperity and social equality. This sense of doom stems from, in Asian American studies, a fault line between the theory of mixed-race existence in the social sciences and the failure to dramatize such existence in the arts. Although the following discussion focuses on plays, but there is equally difficult portrayal of the mixed race in mixed race Asian American novelists’ works.43

Mixed Race on Stage

In accordance with Zack’s claim of the necessity of self-identification of race, the mixed race unequivocally identify themselves as such in occasions of ‘transparent public display’ – in theoretical arguments, collections of interviews, and autobiographical and expository essays. But artistic representations where self-identification and political stance no longer matter as much tend to revert back to lomansu’s self-deprecating or even self-effacing act for the mixed race. For instance, the theatrical productions of Houston and Roberts stage Amerasian characters, but the mixed-race consciousness is inchoate at best and stereotypical at worst. Despite Houston’s avowal that she is “‘whole’ Japanese and ‘whole’ American,” her first play on the subject, ‘Asa Ga Kimashita’ (‘Morning Has Broken’) (premiered in 1981), turns out to be an interracial romance which promises rather than dramatizes the mixed race progeny as well as consciousness. The authorial comment on identity quoted earlier reads like an awkward tag-on to the stage reprise of stereotypical representations of race.

Houston, herself an Afroasian who grew up near an army base in Kansas, re-imagines a postwar Japan in ‘Asa Ga Kimashita’ where the love between an African American sergeant, Creed Banks, and a Japanese woman, Setsuko Shimada, symbolizes the disintegration of the old social order. The landlord Kiheida Shimada takes to drink as his land is being divided up in accordance with General MacArthur’s land reform directive. Kiheida’s gentle and traditional wife is dying a painful death. His tenant refuses the hand of Kiheida’s eldest daughter in favour of the second daughter. The second daughter Setsuko falls in love with Banks. The partitioning of the land and the Shimada family resembles the dying, pun intended, of the alleged monoracial bloodline in Japan. The foreign occupation extends from the island of Japan to the Japanese gene pool. Houston clearly intends this romance to be the dawn of a new era, as the title of the play suggests, leading to the statement about herself being a ‘whole’ Japanese and a ‘whole’ American. The play, nonetheless, enacts nothing but fragmentation and ruination; it focuses on night and not morning. In addition, to create this play, Houston leapfrogs several spaces and times, from her present as a metropolitan intellectual teaching at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles to her childhood in Kansas and then to a postwar Japan. The dramatic urge points to fantasized interracial romance in the past rather than to lived experiences of the mixed race in the present. Even in the two sequels to ‘Asa Ga Kimashita’ in what appears to be a trilogy, ‘American Dreams’ and ‘Tea,’ the playwright only brings us up to date to interracial couples from her Kansas childhood. In so doing, Houston lets pass the golden opportunity to probe into the mixed-race psyche. In fact, there is a mixed-race character
in ‘Asa Ga Kimashita’: Creed Banks, an African American according to one-drop rule, identifies himself as having an American Indian mother, who ‘left the reservation to be with my father.’ However, Banks’s self-identification as mixed-race coexists with other characters’ perception of him as black. Even in play directions, Houston introduces Banks upon his entry as ‘in his military uniform, the handsome African American first sergeant walking with a regal bearing’ (Houston, ‘Asa’ 251). When a minor character, Mitchell Daniels, appears, he is described as ‘a handsome African American soldier’ (Houston, ‘Asa’ 255). The montage of military uniform, African American, and royalty romanticizes the U.S. occupying forces as brown Gods descending upon Japan from Africa by way of America.

As much as one praises Houston’s meticulous and sympathetic depiction of a ravaged Japan, the ideology behind ‘Asa Ga Kimashita’ is clearly U.S.-centric and quite patronizing toward Japan. What Houston accomplishes is to reinterpret cold war mentality in an ethnically-conscious fashion. Take, for instance, the banal plot of cold war Hollywood films where love between Caucasian males and Asian females embodies the management of a vanquished and feminized East. All that is changed in Houston is the substitution of an allegedly mixed-race African American for such white heroes as William Holden in Love is a Many-Splendored Thing (1955) and The World of Suzie Wong (1960), Marlon Brando in Sayonara (1956), Glenn Ford in Teahouse of the August Moon (1956), Laurence Harvey in A Girl Named Tamiko (1962), and, in the post-Vietnam context, Sylvester Stallone in the Rambo series and Mickey Rourke in The Year of the Dragon (1982). With the Yellow Peril of Asian males safely castrated (the drunken landlord and the unruly tenant in ‘Asa Ga Kimashita’), Asian females, ever so desirable and submissive, long for a union with brown Gods like Creed Banks. Interracial children are never featured in any of these Hollywood films or, for that matter, in Houston, except as reminders of the taboo of miscegenation in order to heighten the tragedy of the romance.

In view of Houston’s self-professed ‘activist’ stance for peoples of colour in her introduction to But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise (1997), the kinship to cold war Hollywood films in ‘Asa Ga Kimashita’ is disturbing. This is further evidenced in ‘Tea’ (1993), the finale to the trilogy which opens with ‘Asa Ga Kimashita.’ ‘Tea’ is a story of six war brides from Japan living in Kansas. One of them committed suicide, years after killing her abusive husband as an act of self-defence. Six women, including the ghost, speak in heavy, almost comical accent, an unabashed accommodation of the monolingual American

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audience. This choice of language proves to be entirely unrealistic since the women would, without doubt, converse in Japanese sprinkled with English rather than the other way around. Such a production would no doubt require subtitles projected on to a screen near the stage, as is the convention of opera performances, but it seems to be the most credible way. The only positive, admittedly passing, portrayal of Amerasian characters occurs in Houston’s ‘Kokoro (True Heart)’ (1994), where they become cultural compradors in the best sense of the word, translating between Yasako who murders her own child out of love and the American public and legal system. These minor Amerasian characters enable the Japanese rationale for the infanticide to emerge out of widespread condemnation.

There are two stage plays that deal squarely with mixed-race children: Houston’s ‘As Sometimes in a Dead Man’s Face,’ which was presented as a staged reading at East West Players in 1994; and Roberts’s ‘Breaking Glass’ which was copyrighted in 1995. Biracial like Houston, Roberts has an Oklahoman father and a Taiwanese mother. ‘Breaking Glass’ is collected in But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise, edited by Houston. The two playwrights not only know each other, but their plays featuring mixed-race characters are alarmingly similar, as if they were, in a body, dramatizing the ‘Invisible Monster’ described by Cynthia L. Nakashima: ‘The mixed-race person is seen as the product of an immoral union between immoral people, and is thus expected to be immoral him- or herself.’ Indeed, both plays revolve around dysfunctional interracial families with Kingstonian, controlling Asian matriarchs, absent or inconsequential American fathers, and the ‘mixed’ children who, their insistence of ‘not mixed-up’ notwithstanding, are all angst-ridden and psychotic. The Amerasian children are not just Americanized as in some of Kingston's stories but they are genetically half-Caucasian. The tension of the purported ethnic split unfolds as the Amerasian, in the ‘American tradition’ of individual emancipation, seeks to extricate oneself from clutches of the ‘Asian tradition.’

Both Asian mothers, Emiko in Houston and Mei Jen (called ‘Ma’ throughout the play) in Roberts are accused of dominating to the extent of stifling family members. The father is nonexistent in Houston and the Oklahoman Papa, Buddy, dies of asthma halfway through Roberts’s play. The mixed-race offsprings in both plays are presented as soiled, problematic, and morally suspect. The adopted siblings Daniel and Samantha in ‘As Sometimes in a Dead Man’s Face’ are horribly disfigured: Daniel’s face is burned in a fire and that fiery scene is associated with the conclusion

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whereby the siblings’ pseudo-incest occurs; that fire and the implied rape may have in turn caused the scar on Samantha’s abdomen. The incestuous relationship can be traced back to Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913), where ‘primitive’ tribes inhibit Oedipal tainting of the gene pool exactly because of, hypothesizes Freud, the strong subconscious drive to do so.\(^46\)

Since the mixed-bloods are viewed as illegitimate and monstrous, they somehow belong to the same, as Daniel asserts, ‘tribe’ \(^47\) with the transgressive urge against such a taboo. Houston enacts through the incestuous motif the perception that the mixed race result from bastardization. While devoid of incest, the mixed-race children in ‘Breaking Glass’ are equally troubled: Ricki is overweight and fraught with self-doubt; Jimmy is seen as a retard. Scarred by racism, the playwrights try to wrest self-identity out of imposed degradation for the mixed race, only to end up reiterating the degradation.

It is in fact disconcerting to observe the evolution from Roberts’s Peabody-award-winning radio play ‘Mei Mei: A Daughter’s Song’ (1989) to Roberts’s stage play ‘Breaking Glass’ (1995).\(^48\) The cast for both plays remains largely the same, but the daughter-narrator’s conciliatory and affectionate tone in the autobiographical radio play hardens into, seven years later, the Amerasian children’s struggle to survive the vice of their Taiwanese American mother repeatedly facing accusations: ‘She kills everyone.’ \(^49\)

‘Breaking Glass’ outlines the Amerasian straitjacket of an existence between racism in the society and the tightening noose at home. The ‘Chinese’ genes in Ricki and Jimmy render them pariahs, taunted by rednecks in a passing truck. On the other hand, their ‘Ma’ defines them as Chinese in order to arrange their lives according to her wishes. ‘Ma’ handpicks a Chinese girl for Jimmy and drives away Jimmy’s Caucasian girlfriend by invoking the spectre of mixed-race progeny. More importantly, ‘Ma’ longs to open a Chinese restaurant so much that she robs Ricki and Jimmy of their insurance money from the deceased father Buddy to cover the restaurant’s down payment. The complexly knotted family love and control emerge in the fact that Buddy first steals the money from the mother’s bank account to purchase a life insurance policy. From the Amerasian children’s perspective, however, ‘Ma’ is nothing


\(^{48}\) Despite the playwright’s modification of her name in the later play, it is still copyrighted under ‘D. Roberts.’ For detailed analysis of Roberts’s ‘Mei Mei: A Daughter’s Song,’ see Sheng-Mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp.20-3.

but a menacing alien, which is how she suits up in the Star Wars fantasy entertained by Ricki and Jimmy. Some hope lies in the play’s namesake, the mosaic of stained glass Jimmy laboriously solders together, an apt metaphor for the beauty and fragility of the mixed race. At the end of the play, Jimmy smashes his art work when he is torn between Ricki’s plea for him to leave home and Ma’s unrelenting chokehold. The happy ending to ‘Mei Mei’ with the soundtrack’s laughter, raindrops, and the dissolving of generation gap seems in ‘Breaking Glass’ a remote echo.

Conclusion

The development of the Asian American mixed-race discourse is still in its initial stages. In addition to the works cited above, recent literary activities by the mixed race include: Sigrid Nunez, who is a quarter Chinese, explores her interlocked ethnic identities in A Feather on the Breath of God (1995). In the equally autobiographical The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee: Observations on Not Fitting In (2000), Paisley Rekdal of Norwegian-American and Chinese-American parentage travels through Asia in search of, partially, ancestral roots, and Heinz Insu Fenkl of Korean and American descent, the only male mixed-race writer cited thus far, writes a nostalgic yet utterly anti-romantic Memories of My Ghost Brother (1996). All these critics and artists are trying to carve an existence out of sheer oblivion. One can only appreciate the Sisyphian task of formulating a mixed-race identity by taking stock of all the cameo appearances of the mixed race in Western and Asian American texts by non-Amerasians. Madame Butterfly’s interracial son debuts briefly before the ritual suicide which concludes Giacomo Puccini’s opera. David and Susie Mura’s interracial child remains unborn in David Mura’s Turning Japanese (1991). Chang-rae Lee’s Native Speaker (1995) has at its core a dead interracial child and his A Gesture Life (1999) features an Afro-Korean who vanishes for thirteen years. Jessica Hagedorn’s mixed-race prostitute Joey Sands in Dogeaters (1990) personifies the hybrid, postcolonial Philippines. Mixed-race characters surface as well in Amy Tan’s The Hundred Secret Senses (1995) and Gish Jen’s Who’s Irish? (1999). In the face of such general marginalization, mixed-race writers map out their identity, while paradoxically drawing from hegemony’s images of themselves.

Granted that bold theoretical attempts and self-identifications of Zack, Root, Hall, and many others have given birth to the Asian American mixed-race discourse, this first step in identity formation is yet to bring into existence discernible mixed-race characters and consciousness in Asian American literature. Mixed-race consciousness prophesized by social
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sciences remains largely unfulfilled in Asian American art and literature; no less than a fault line divides theory and praxis, or political postures and poetic representations, with respect to the mixed race. Such is the epistemological dilemma of the mixed race: they are in our midst and they are not. The exuberant claims of theorists, essayists, and interviewees notwithstanding, the segment of essay on ‘Multiracial’ can only reconstruct the skeleton of a mixed race from bits and pieces of the alleged being fashioned by mixed-race playwrights. Despite moments of great potential in these plays, what I find is a perennial impasse between, on the one hand, what the theorists and the common folks proclaim about the existence of the mixed race and, on the other, the occasional and problematic ‘sightings’ on stage. To theorists, the mixed race is an alloy forged in the crucible of human suffering, more resilient than the unadulterated metals from which it arises. To artists, however, the mixed race is elusive and intangible, like the highly unstable, colourless, odourless carbon monoxide (CO) produced in the foundry of race, instantly converted to carbon dioxide (CO$_2$), that is, the relatively steady phenotypes of American or Asian.

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The Hybridity of the Asian American Subject in Cynthia Kadohata’s *The Floating World*

Jopi Nyman

Abstract

This article examines the novel *The Floating World* (1989) by the Japanese American author Cynthia Kadohata. I will read Kadohata’s novel in the context of post-colonial theory. The article will argue that the novel seeks to redefine America as a space of hybridity in a manner that is not merely celebratory. Rather, Kadohata’s novel shows that the process of constructing hybrid identities is also one of violence, trauma and unease. In my reading I will show that the novel’s representation of hybridity is constructed in the framework of memory and ghosts. In my discussion of the novel, I will address its representation of in-betweenness by using the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha and Walter Benjamin. Furthermore, as the novel’s protagonist’s identity is redefined through notions and problematizations of movement, mobility, and home, the novel is interpreted as an instance of the formation of a new, diasporic identity seeking to challenge the discourse of fixed origins.

Introduction

The fictions of the Japanese American novelist Cynthia Kadohata imagine new spaces and forms of identity as results of travel and dislocation, questioning fixed notions of home, identity, and mobility. Each of Kadohata’s novels locates its characters in varying spaces of exile and in-betweenness by defamiliarizing America in terms of space and genre. Such strategies include the work of cultural memory evoked in her first novel *The Floating World* (1989) telling of the experiences of the menial Japanese American labour in the US West in the 1950s, the dystopic narrative of the fragmented USA of 2052 as imagined in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992), and Mariska’s planet Artakka in the science fiction novel *Glass Mountains* (1995). Through their focus on the diasporic subject, and her constant search for community in particular, Kadohata’s works not only interrogate dominant notions of belonging and home but also imagine new forms of subjectivity. It is the aim of this article to read Kadohata’s fiction in the context of post-colonial theory as contributing towards a redefinition of America as a hybrid space that is both one of becoming and one of constant unease, one of promise and disappointment, and one of isolation and community. Since the issues of belonging and identity are particularly striking in *The Floating World*, this novel will be in the focus of this article. As I will argue, the novel’s hybrid space is constructed in the framework of memory and

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ghosts through which its protagonist inhabits diasporic space and hybrid time. In my discussion of the novel, I will address its representation of in-betweenness by using the terms of Homi K. Bhabha and Walter Benjamin.

Narrated from the perspective of a Japanese American girl Olivia, Kadohata’s first novel maps out Olivia’s family’s movements in the US West of the 1950s, from Oregon and California to Arkansas in search of work. Combining memory and child-like observation, the novel emphasises questions of belonging and the immigrant subject’s search for community and home. Set in a period hostile to Japanese Americans, and showing their insecurity and ambiguity, the novel is not a mere nostalgic recollection of childhood memories but addresses questions of identity, race, and tradition. In their reading of the novel, You-me Park and Gayle Wald, indeed, argue that Olivia’s final reconstruction of self shows that it is possible for Asian American women to arrive at such an awareness ‘outside the ruthlessly sexualizing and racializing gaze of the dominant culture.’

However, this redefinition of Olivia’s identity through notions and problematizations of movement, mobility, and home can also be explored as an instance of the formation of a new, diasporic identity seeking to challenge the discourse of fixed origins. This is what Susheila Nasta (following the work of Avtar Brah) finds typical of diasporic narratives and calls “homing desire,” a desire to reinvent and rewrite home. In diasporic identity formation, Brah suggests, the idea of a fixed home gives way to more fluid ways of finding and narrating home in other spaces. Yet this not an unproblematic process but one that involves fear, trauma, and ambiguity:

Diasporas emerge out of migrations of collectivities, whether or not the members of the diasporas travel as individuals, as households or in various other combinations. Diasporas are places of long-term, if not permanent, community formations, even if some households or members move on to elsewhere. The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure.

In defining diaspora as a site of forging a new cultural identity through memory, Brah’s view comes close to Bhabha’s idea of hybridization as a process taking place in the Third Space of enunciation, where identity is reconstituted in a

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process where fixed meanings are reconstructed, or translated, into different ones: ‘Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.’ In other words, the formation of hybrid Asian American identity challenges the fixed discourses defining cultural and national identity providing images of proper Americanness.

Several aspects of diasporic and hybrid identity can be found in Kadohata’s novel, which seeks to rewrite America by projecting it as a site of hybridity and diaspora. Indeed, the related problems of home, family, and community, as suggested by Brah, are foregrounded in the novel’s way of charting the family’s journey and relocation in Arkansas, a process that must be discussed from more than one angle as it contrasts the fates of the family and the narrator. The mobility of the family is partially imposed upon them by the racist and economic practices of the period (‘We were all very quiet in public’ [72]), thus locating them in a historical nightmare and racist treatment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Their movement is framed in a more comprehensive diasporic narrative emphasising the role of the Japanese American community as a family-like provider of safety. Not only do diasporic families travel together in the manner of the Osakas and the Shibatas, and help each other in finding work, but the community helps its members, which can be seen when the family friend Isamu accommodates the children in his house in Nebraska for some time during the parents’ problems. The important role of the community can be seen in the following passage:

We were bound to the Japanese in Arkansas just as my mother, father, brothers, and I were bound to each other; just as our relatives in Los Angeles soon saw us bound to the residents of Gibson. So in this way my family was rooted in a community. I felt safe. That was the thing I liked most about Arkansas. (94)

Regardless of differences in occupational structure, these tiny communities of Japanese Americans in the region (amounting to 14 in Gibson and 20-30 in Lee) are joined to each other, as can be seen in the use of the metaphor of the road: ‘The highway spreads itself through quiet, humid land, curling with two lanes through the Ozarks, and later opening to four lanes and passing through the centers of towns – it was the main street of Lee, Fort Jefferson, Hilldale, Ashland, and countless other places’ (105). By providing the small towns with symbolic names related to American history and landscape, the text reworks the notion of America to show that the smallest of towns in Arkansas are no longer ethnically pure but host diasporic communities linked to each other by highways and travellers. It is, indeed, in movement between different locations that the

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(im)migrant subject is constructed. In the following passage Olivia tells of the reunification of the family and their journeying from Nebraska to California:

After supper my family drove off. We were going to California to pick up Peter. I liked to stick my head out the window, and my mother always gave me permission to open the window for five minutes, no matter how cold it was. I felt the frigid air hit my face. It was dark out. When the plains were white that way, I always had difficulty making out where the earth ended; it was as if the ground simply curled upward. When it was dark out each morning on the way to our school bus, I used to look at the lighted farmhouses and imagine how cities must be, with lighted houses piled on lighted houses. That’s the way I imagined apartments, farmhouse on farmhouse into the sky. In the night I could picture it without even closing my eyes. (17-8)

By locating Olivia and her family in the vastness of never-ending wintry whiteness, the passage symbolically explores the limited autonomy of the racialized subject. It also uses the metaphoric opposition between the outside and the inside: while remaining inside the car, Olivia sticks out her head into the cold white world but remains within her community. Looking at the lighted farmhouses, she is forced to remain an outsider, someone in the dark rather than in the light, a narrative strategy that locates the Japanese American in the margins of America.

Narratives of Migration

In her study, Helena Grice argues that ‘Asian American women writers are extensively preoccupied with issues of space, place and the idea of “home.”’6 This is, indeed, the case in Kadohata’s novel, as revealed in the passages discussed above and on several occasions in the narrative where the question of belonging is raised. Most strikingly this can be seen in the mother’s interest in famous Americans. However, while these are available to her only through commodified forms of popular culture telling of allegedly shared values, the narrative makes it explicit that this interest may also be a sign of resistance and an attempt to hybridize the signified by reading it from the perspective of cultural difference:

She [my mother] admired presidents’ wives and liked to know what they ate and wore, liked to know the odd fact that made them human. For instance, she liked knowing that Andrew Jackson’s wife married him mistakenly, thinking she’d obtained a divorce from her first husband, or knowing that Mrs. Polk, who was very religious, prohibited liquor and dancing in the White House – ‘No wonder the Polks had no children,’ she would say. She’d

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had probably inherited her interest in first ladies from Obāsan, who used to revere the Japanese emperor and his wife. ‘The emperor was a moron,’ Obāsan once said, ‘but he was still the emperor.’ (27)

Grice claims that in contemporary Asian American narratives one can find a shift from what she calls ‘psychologies of exile’ to ‘narratives of migration’: narratives of the former kind emphasise the problem of belonging (to home or community) whereas the latter seek to rethink the idea of home.7 The Floating World appears to show both modes, yet it links the former more with the older generation and the latter with the younger. The contrast can be seen perhaps most clearly in Olivia’s mother, whose desire to find her biological father after her mother’s funeral sends the whole family back towards his house in a small town in California. Not surprisingly, her father turns out to have passed away a long time ago and his widow remains unappreciative of her unexpected guests. When Olivia’s mother finds her childhood shoes, the widow thinks that she wants them back; she also finds an enamelled box ‘she thought belonged to her’ (55) and which Olivia steals but returns. Belonging and attachment to a place appear not to work, and they are made more complicated by history:

When we left the house and the woman closed the door, the lights went off almost immediately. The woman seemed to have come to life just for us. My mother called me over to a window, and we peeked in. ‘What do you see?’ she said.

I stared. I squinted. I tried to imagine. Finally I said, ‘Nothing.’

She nodded sagely. ‘That’s what I see.’ I thought she was still a little crazy from her mother dying. (56)

The experience of exile is central to Olivia’s mother, who appears to be a melancholic person, believing that belonging will provide relief. A woman with an interest in reading and books in a community not promoting such activities for women (73) tells her daughter to ‘[r]ead the Existentialists’ (138). Haunted by her own memories, and carrying the burden of an extra-marital affair and the fact that Charlie is not Olivia’s biological father, the search for a better place offers promise for her: ‘my parents were dissatisfied with their marriage, and, somehow, moving seemed to give vent to that dissatisfaction’ (4). Indeed, place, as the words of Lucy Asano reveal, may not evoke any emotion: ‘[She] was born in Lee and lived there until she was thirteen. I ran into her once when we were both visiting Arkansas in our mid-twenties. She said she felt no bursts of nostalgia, no sadness and no happiness, to return’ (107). Yet for Olivia, the ghost of the past returns through memories of her grandmother and transitory experiences.

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7 See Grice, pp.201-2.
In Olivia’s story, the exilic sense of belonging gives way to her redefinition of self, which is narrated in the story in terms of space and movement. Her sense of doubleness, or being split between the domestic and the public terrain, starts with nocturnal wanderings that begin at the age of fourteen: ‘I’d begun to have two lives: my life at home and my life with my friends. [...] I pictured a far-off future in which spend all my time friends and only visited my family. It seemed hard to believe that would happen’ (87). The connection between space and identity is further emphasised in Olivia’s narrative of carving out her own space, seen most clearly in leaving the town and claiming her home in Los Angeles. For her, migration is the key to self-transformation:

> My family had lived many places, and traveled many places. I thought then that Arkansas was the most beautiful place I had ever been in, yet I wanted badly to leave, and I knew that, unlike Toshi and Nori and Kazuo – and even my father, committed now to his garage – somehow I would have that freedom. (133)

The second part of the novel, then, through telling of Olivia’s journeying to Los Angeles, her experiences as a salesperson in a shop selling lamps, her relationship with Andy, and finally through her act of taking up the business of her biological father Jack, reworks the genre of the bildungsroman. Yet it does so in a manner which, as Nasta has pointed out, is characteristic of post-colonial and diasporic novels. To quote Nasta, such works disrupt the seamless pattern of social integration typical of the genre, whilst simultaneously positing a need to invent an alternative means of inscription and identification. In fact, it is the tension of negotiating a space between the wider society’s powers of cultural signification, and thereby recasting the traditional and restrictive ‘frame of [the] Bildung.’ That distinguishes [...] the mosaic-like actions of the characters in both texts, and liberates them from the spaces previously allocated to them by their pre-determined social and cultural positionings.8

By moving into Los Angeles with the intention of first working and then studying, Olivia refuses her integration into the role of an ethnic woman condemned either to the home or to prostitution (see 150). Her decision to move into her own flat rather than living with Aunt Lily symbolically represents a spatialized sense of identity and suggests that a tight connection to the family and community is not necessarily the only option. Yet Olivia’s successful negotiation of her own identity in metropolitan space is contrasted with the boy boarding the bus in Oklahoma, who tries to be friends with everyone and constantly offers them Kool-Aid but who is shown leaving the bus in Los Angeles alone with ‘his jug of red Kool-Aid, and it was still full’ (151). Her

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8 Nasta, p.195; addition original.
Bildung, indeed, aims at constructing her own space rather than the acceptance of any general truths: ‘Aunt Lily called me every day for a month, saying I ought to move back in with her family’ (155). That this is process she remains unaware of is evident in the following words: ‘After I left Gibson, I lived a disorderly life, not from any spirit of rebellion, nor from any coherent philosophy, but simply because I didn’t yet realize there were other ways of living’ (153).

Unhomely Houses

Since homes and houses are, as Grice has suggested, recurring tropes in Asian American women’s writing,9 their representations are plenty in this novel: ‘Each house had its own personality, its own advantages to recommend it’ (33). They extend from a description of the grandmother’s ‘clean’ boarding house and Collie’s (a gambling friend of her father’s) neglected and desolate house (93) to Olivia’s own flat in Los Angeles. Set in an area full of musicians and (often failed) Hollywood people, her apartment is located between two worlds, home and not-home: ‘It gave me that old feeling of being displaced and safe at the same time, like when I used to play in the small woods back of my house at night’ (155).

The problematization of the notion of belonging is performed in the narrative through these spaces of displacement and in-betweenness. As the title of Kadohata’s novel signifies, its characters inhabit a floating world, moving from one city and state to another in the manner of all migrant workers. This space is indeed one described by Olivia’s grandmother through her use of the Japanese word ukiyo (3). It is one that is peculiar to migrant travellers and their experience of being cut off from the stability of the dominant culture and middle-class values, available to them only in the marginal spaces of the American roadside restaurants whose neon lights cannot be escaped: ‘To the side, the sign from Monty’s Bar and Grill rose off the highway. I could view the sign from my bedroom; sometimes it was the last thing I saw before I fell asleep’ (137). While such passages link the novel with the American genre of the road narrative, in this novel their function is to construct the migrant as occupying a space of in-betweenness, as delineated by Bhabha. As suggested in the beginning of this article, his Third Space is a space where the binaries constructing cultural identities break down, constructing a hybrid identity and transforming meaning-making. In Bhabha’s view, such moments of enunciation are unhomely, ghost-like, familiar yet unknown: ‘In this displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part

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of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. The same process is described by Kadohata as follows:

We were traveling then in what she called ukiyo, the floating world. The floating world was the gas station attendants, restaurants, and jobs we depended on, the motel towns floating in the middle of fields and mountains. In old Japan, ukiyo meant the districts full of brothels, teahouses, and public baths, but it also referred to change and the pleasures and loneliness change brings. For a long time, I never exactly thought of us as part of any of that, though. We were stable, traveling through an unstable world while my father looked for jobs. (3; emphasis original)

The passage imagines the migrant’s position as one of movement, brief encounters and instability. It also shows how a fixed sense of home is rewritten and replaced with transitory experiences of belonging that are not entirely negative yet remain unfamiliar. In other words, the tropes of travel and change are interchangeable and promising rather than uniformly threatening, which is referred to in the novel as ‘the pleasures and loneliness change brings’ (3). By invoking this liminal and haunting space in the margins of respectable society as being capable of empowering the immigrant family, the novel constructs their identity as a border identity, located between cultures and nations. Roger Bromley describes such narratives as being constructed around figures who look in from the outside while looking out from the inside, to the extent that both inside and outside lose the defining contours. They are figures with hyphenated identities, living hybrid realities which pose problems for classification and control, as well as raising questions about notions of essential difference. The in-between zones are shifting grounds, threshold spaces, and displacement and migration have led to a struggle for spaces where identity is endlessly constructed, and deconstructed, across difference and against set inside/outside oppositions.

In *The Floating World*, the world occupied by the immigrant family is a space of in-betweenness where different realities flow into each other and, in so doing, transform them and their identity. As Olivia’s mother puts it upon reflecting on her father’s death: ‘I’ve never found a reference to a wooden rose in books on flowers, but I’m sure it existed. I remember thinking it was impossible, just like my father’s death was impossible. For a few hours, I was in another realm, and impossible things happened’ (7). The image of a wooden rose, and the reference to ‘another realm,’ can be seen as signs of hybridization suggestive of the emergence of new modes of subjectivity in these liminal spaces.

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10 Bhabha, p.9.
The Hybridity of the Asian American Subject

The sense of uncanniness is taken further in the novel through its use of doubles, which emphasises the novel’s explorations of identity. The instances of the uncanny usage of the double include the story of the beautiful man, referred to as the devil in disguise, who once stayed at the grandmother’s boarding house, seducing her, bringing bad luck and eventually causing the death of her husband (34). Furthermore, at the end of the first chapter of the novel Olivia meets a white man, whom she falsely identifies as the owner of a farm nearby but who is revealed to be a killer:

Another car drove by, illuminating his face, and I saw what was so strange about him. He wasn’t who I thought he was, not the farmer at all. I saw angles on his face where I thought there had been slopes, and he had a flesh-coloured bandage, partly hidden by hair, over one of his eyebrows. (10)

Indeed, this space is not only one of potential change but also one where the presence of death and danger is constantly felt. In the view of Bhabha, the presence of the unhomely, the uncanny (das Unheimliche), suggests that the personal and the public are related: ‘The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.’

Thus, the character’s mis-recognitions suggest the mutability of identity and its instability: the hybrid self to be formed challenges the fixed notion of preferred Americanness, yet it cannot be the same because of its racial and cultural marking.

Regardless of its dangers, this space of in-betweenness cannot be resisted since it also brings about a notion of promise. Available only through and in migration, it is the space of transformation and reconstruction of identity. To quote Olivia, ‘I wanted to explain how when Louise had jumped, I was somewhere there with her in the air, hanging halfway between the blue sky and the blue water, so that for a moment I couldn’t tell whether we were rising or falling’ (92). For Andy, the Third Space is available through his highly dangerous profession of wrecking cars for insurance purposes. This is also evident in the following words uttered by Olivia after the family has witnessed an accident, words that suggest that the hybrid subject is constructed through violence, trauma, and memory:

I knew that a person had been hurt, maybe killed, yet to me the accident was already becoming something that had happened, just something that had happened, the way a fire we might pass on the road was just a fire we passed on the road, even though it was someone’s house of farm burning. It was just part of Obisan’s floating world. There had been a couple of boys hanging around the accident. They might remember that night, at least a little bit, every time they walked by. This was probably bad for them, but also good.

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12 Bhabha, p.11.
They would never have to brace themselves against all the things they couldn’t know. And why couldn’t my brothers be among those boys? (41)

**Ghostly Irruptions**

Since the negotiation of identity also involves a redefinition of home, the narrative thematizes questions of history, of past and present narratives and selves. It can be argued that the novel thematizes history through memories, flashes from the past that are filtered through the narrator, and that are not unproblematic. This can be seen in the vignette-like opening of Chapter 7, where the colour of the landscape changes from yellow to purple, generating alertness and silence, a passage that inserts the mobile history into the narrator’s present. In describing the landscape, the casual mode of travel shifts into alertness and an eerie silence:

> We passed in and out of alertness while we traveled. Late one morning while we drove through endless fields of yellow flowers, suddenly one or two purple flowers appeared. I sat up. Sometimes a sudden new color made me alert. In a minute there were scattered bursts, then waves, of purple. We were quiet. (61)

The philosopher Walter Benjamin has suggested that in such *Denkbilder* the past and the present are both present, and that flash-like moments are often also moments of danger: ‘The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.’13 Interpretations of Benjamin argue that such images are not merely neutral but signs of the presence of the past that comes, enters and disrupts the present, occasionally taking a ghostly form. In his introduction to *Benjamin’s Ghosts*, Gerhard Richter suggests that their (moments’ and ghosts’) emergence in transitory spaces is always linked with irrruptions in the text.14 ‘As is so often the case in Benjamin, the spectre appears on the windowsill, one of his privileged transitory sites, and hence inscribes itself into the topography of the transitory.’15 Rainer Nägele’s analysis of Benjamin’s textual irrruptions (*Einbruchstellen*), then, suggests that they are

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15 Richter, p.5.
place[s] where something interrupts, breaks in, intervenes, like a thief in the night.\textsuperscript{16}

In addition to actual ghosts, which haunt the novel’s protagonists as I will show, \textit{The Floating World} contains several moments of textual irruption where the present of the narrative is broken with memories from the past – this can be seen in the sudden emergence of purple flowers that silence the travelling family, a ghostly moment if anything. Similar instances of flash-like images from the narrator’s childhood in the novel include her memory of her mother’s ambiguous kinesic movements that resist interpretation: ‘Nobody talked at all. I couldn’t tell what my parents were thinking, or feeling. Sometimes I spent hours trying to figure them out, trying to make order of the random facts. My mother’s body shook once, and I couldn’t tell whether she was still crying or just had a chill’ (43). The mother’s body transforms from the familiar to the unfamiliar; similarly, language gives way to silence.

Since the images are, for Benjamin, always historical, the presence of such instances in minority discourse shows how the novel tries to work through the history of Asian America and the need to re-remember it in order to avoid the repetition of the past. For Ato Quayson, this process is articulated in trauma, and can be dealt with through the notion of rememory as exemplified in Toni Morrison’s novel \textit{Beloved}; the idea of rememory is in his view ‘analogous with Benjamin’s notion of the monad,’\textsuperscript{17} the encapsulated moment laden with tensions. To quote Quayson,

\begin{quote}
the narrative then recalls history as a series of fleeting impressions and affects, with the arching order being the drastic traumatic effect of the experience of slavery. It is this experience that seems to ultimately shape past, present, and future and forces time to be figured as loss, dispersal, and elusive apprehension.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

In such experiences, as also Morrison’s novel shows, the history takes the form of the ghost, whose emergence in the view of Benjamin also marks a moment of irruption. Kadohata’s equivalents of the ghostly in Morrison’s \textit{Beloved} include the ghost of the grandmother (who is present in the everyday life of the family through her photograph) and, in particular, that of the narrator’s dead biological father. In this ghost story, Olivia’s biological father dies and his widow telephones Olivia, now 21 and living in Arizona, urging her to take over, at least temporarily, his business of refilling vending machines in

\textsuperscript{17} Ato Quayson, \textit{Calibrations: Reading for the Social} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.134.
\textsuperscript{18} Quayson, p.133.
offices and gas stations in small towns. Setting out originally with her father Charlie, Olivia sends him home and finishes the route by herself. In so doing she re-enters the floating world of bus stations, Chinese-Italian restaurants, and cafeterias where tired people sit ‘yawning and disheveled, eating chili or mashed potatoes at 4 A.M.’ (191). It is in this unhomely, dream-like space that the ghost appears, at a gas station, where Olivia steps into the uncanny hybrid time:

His image was not quite right. I realized he was a ghost when the wind came up but didn’t muss his hair, just made his whole body flow to the side and back. His personality seemed to flow back and forth, as well: at first, with his cagey glances to one side, he reminded me of a weasel; then he smiled to himself and seemed almost innocent. (193)

In a one-way discussion with the father’s silent and ‘elastic’ ghost, the traumas of the past are resolved at several levels, including those of her parents’ troublesome marriage and her own childhood traumas. The final paragraph also suggests of the transformation of a more social trauma, promising a sense of consolation and the possibility of not remembering the trauma constantly:

What time was it? I was getting sleepy. The dry air smelled faintly of gasoline. I still had another stop, and for a moment I began to worry about my work and forgot about Jack. I tried to calculate from the night sky what time it was, but then I gave up. It didn’t matter; it was high time I left. (194)

By working through the trauma, the question of home is re-enacted in the narrative. As the always-missing notion of home is finally replaced with a recognition of the unhomeliness of the Third Space, Olivia accepts her migrant identity. The ghost comes and goes, marking a crisis of identity in its emergence and its resolution in its disappearance, reinscribing Olivia into America as a hybrid and diasporic subject, fulfilling her homing desire.

In Kadohata’s novel, the final confrontation between the traumas of the past and their entry into the present takes the symbolic form of meeting with the ghost of the father. Kathleen Brogan has argued that recent ethnic fiction in the US displays a high number of ghosts with important narrative functions, and that the genre of ‘cultural haunting’ has emerged, ‘record[ing] the struggle to establish some form of historical continuity that allows for a necessary distance from the past.’ 19 In the terms of Benjamin, the textualization of the ghost suggests of the unavoidable presence of a past that the ethnic subject is unable to avoid, and whose burden may irrupt at any point in time. Yet the ending of the novel and its main character’s decision to leave do not necessarily signal of closure and a simple transition from mobility to a fixed sense of home. Rather

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than a mere monologue, her discussion with the silent ghost of the father is a sign of the beginnings of a dialogic relationship with America, signalling of her acceptance of hybrid identity. While remaining an inhabitant of the floating world, she regains agency through the confrontation with the past and feels finally able to start college, having negotiated her sense of home upon her acceptance of its diasporic and hybrid character.

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Problematic Hybrid Identity in the Diasporic Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri

Joel Kuortti

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which Jhumpa Lahiri’s writing engages with the issue of translation – if not non-translation – of identity. Main attention is on one of her stories, namely ‘This Blessed House’ from the Interpreter of Maladies. It is a post-colonial reading of the story and suggests that the emptiness of the house is illusory to begin with, that the artefacts were not ‘hidden’ nor ‘left behind.’ The colonialist, on arrival in the colony, assumed ownership over such things, without even considering the existence of the invisible colonized. In a diasporic post-colonial situation, as in Lahiri’s story, discoveries of empty spaces are unattainable – again underlining the falsity of the colonial situation; there never was an ‘empty space.’ It is argued that where something analogous to an ‘empty space’ can be found in diasporic stories is in questions of identity, although it is not a space of emptiness but of hybridity.

Introduction

Some time after the publication of her collection Interpreter of Maladies (1999) to international acclaim, the award-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri wrote about her experiences as a hybrid, diasporic being, as, variously, an American author, an Indian-American author, a British-born author, an Anglo-Indian author, an NRI (non-resident Indian), an ABCD (American-born confused desi),¹ and a lost and found author, and concludes: ‘each of those labels is accurate.’² In this piece, she describes fiction writing as an act of cultural translation and identity formation in a tongue-in-cheek Cartesian manner: ‘Translato ergo sum,’ I translate, therefore I am.

The Indian critic Harish Trivedi, in a direct response to Lahiri’s views, is very sceptical of such ‘abuse or, in theoretical euphemism, such catachrestic use, of the term translation’ and would rather see ‘instances of a kind of translation which does not involve two texts, or even one text, and certainly

¹ In her novel Born Confused, Tanuja Desai Hidier records the full designation asigned by the first generation migrants on the second generation as follows: ‘American Born Confused Desi Emigrated From Gujarat House In Jersey Keeping Lotsa Motels Named Omkarnath Patel Quickly Reaching Success Through Underhanded Vicious Ways Xenophobic Yet Zestful’, Tanuja Desai Hidier, Born Confused (New York: Scholastic, 2003), p.108.
not more than one language’ as ‘non-translation.’\(^3\) As Susan Bassnett characterizes the change in the past decade, these two diametrically opposed views on ‘cultural translation’ illustrated by Lahiri’s and Trivedi’s comments inform much of the debate on post-colonial and diasporic subjectivity, especially on the theme of hybridity.\(^4\) In ‘Des Tours de Babel,’ Jacques Derrida brings up the double-bind of translation in his comment on ‘the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility’, implying an inevitable alteration in translation.\(^5\) In Salman Rushdie’s \textit{Shame} the narrator then takes this inevitable alteration in translation to the subjective, cultural level: ‘I, too am a translated man. I have been \textit{borne} across. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained.’\(^6\) This aspect of being \textit{borne} across is significantly close to Homi K. Bhabha’s metaphorical use of the term \textit{translation} in a post-colonial world to signify ‘the “inter” – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the \textit{in-between} space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.’\(^7\)

In this article I will look at the ways in which Lahiri engages with the issue of translation – if not non-translation – of identity in her writings. My main attention will be on one of her stories, namely ‘This Blessed House’ from the \textit{Interpreter of Maladies}, but I will also use other stories from the collection, as well as her novel \textit{Namesake} (2004), for illustration. I do not try to claim a universal applicability for my reading as I agree with Avtar Brah on the importance of perceiving the diversity of diasporic experiences.\(^8\) Rather, I try to consider Lahiri’s text in its specific contextuality, keeping in mind the reservations concerning the determinability of a context, especially in the way Derrida has defined it: ‘a context is never absolutely determinable.’\(^9\)

\(^7\) Homi K. Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture} (London: Routledge, 1994), p.38; emphasis original.
Translating Identity

One of the more visible geographical contexts of diasporic Indian women’s writing is the United States. There are an increasing number of new writers emerging from there, and many of them gain recognition. Even in the less circulated genre of short stories, there have been achievements, as the case of Lahiri attests. In many of the new literary arrivals, the thematics revolve around cultural identity, cultural hybridity, and cultural conflict. In this, the connection between India and the United States is of importance, as Mary Condé comments: ‘Many collections of Indian women’s short stories in the nineteen-nineties confront a collision of cultures, and this is a preoccupation, increasingly with the collision of cultures of India and the United States.’ It is in such a context of collision of cultures that the stories in Lahiri’s collection take place. In various ways, they engage in the translation of hybrid diasporic identity.

The story ‘This Blessed House’ opens with a portentous sentence: ‘They discovered the first one in a cupboard.’ The performative act of discovering and its description as being the first one suggest a chain of findings that is potentially transformative. Although this discovery takes place in an ordinary context of a young newly-wed couple moving into a new house, and the finding is from an everyday context – ‘a cupboard above the stove, beside an unopened bottle of malt vinegar’ – the path of discovery has colonial resonances especially as it links with the so-called ‘discovery of America.’ This is emphasized by the fact that the beginning of the story takes place close to ‘Columbus Day’ in October 12 (see 144), a remembrance of the day in which Christoforo Columbo, or Christopher Columbus, reached the Americas in 1492.

The couple in Lahiri’s story, Sanjeev and Tanima, nicknamed Twinkle, are Americans of Indian origin, who have been introduced to each other by their parents’ arrangement, and married in India in August. In their diasporic condition, they demonstrate hybrid identities that are in a state of constant negotiation with both the past and the present, India and the United States, even though there is no clear discontinuity between the two; Twinkle is a

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Californian by birth with no first-hand experience of India, while Sanjeev is a more recent migrant. When they first met four months prior to their wedding, they found that they had in common ‘their adolescent but still persistent fondness for Wodehouse novels, and their dislike for the sitar’ (143). This literary and musical connection (with colonial and counter-traditional undertones) between them is soon shown to be less than deep-seated. While Sanjeev lapses into the moods of ‘love and happiness’ (141) of Gustav Mahler’s ‘Adagietto’ from Symphony No. 5 (C sharp minor, 4th movement), Twinkle playfully wields her cigarette, ‘waving it around Sanjeev’s head as if it were a conductor’s baton’ (139). Furthermore, as they prepare a house-warming party for Sanjeev’s colleagues, Twinkle comments on the music that ‘if you want to impress people, I wouldn’t play this music. It’s putting me to sleep’ (140). It follows that eventually at the party it is Twinkle who plays ‘hectic jazz records’ (152) of her choice. In the relationship, then, there is not only a cultural difference but also a reversal of the conventional gender roles: romance, care, beauty, and girlishness are given as male characteristics whereas curiosity, raucousness, carelessness, and assertiveness are seen as female qualities.

The scene inventively underlines the differences between the couple by making, on the one hand, an intertextual gesture towards Luchino Visconti’s film ‘Death in Venice’ in which Mahler’s music (particularly the adagietto) plays an important part and, on the other hand, to Indian ragas and Meera bhajans which Silvia Nakkach connects especially with the adagietto of Mahler’s fifth Symphony as they all demonstrate one of the nine navarasa’s of Indian aesthetic theory – the karuna rasa, the sentiment of pathos. Both Twinkle and Sanjeev are apparently drawn to ‘Western’ culture – Twinkle more intuitively and innately, and Sanjeev more purposefully and studiously (ordering Western classical music records systematically and listening to Bach reading ‘liner notes so as to understand it properly’ [155]) – but perhaps due to his more recent arrival, Sanjeev is, still, closer to Indian than Western culture. In addition, the earlier literary connection proves to be shallow, which is made clear by a reference to Twinkle’s subject of study, ‘an Irish poet Sanjeev had never heard of’ (145). The poet’s name is not revealed, but

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<www.voxmundiproject.com/recommended_readings_1.htm>.
at one point Twinkle is reading a book of Sonnets ‘in dark red letters’ (148). As the scene takes place in the bathroom where Sanjeev goes, without knocking on the door, to tell the bathing Twinkle that he is going to remove the statue of the Virgin from the lawn, the allusion could be even to W. B. Yeats’s sonnet ‘Leda and the Swan,’ which Edward W. Said describes as an instance of Yeats’s ‘greatest decolonizing works [that] concern the birth of violence, or the violent birth of change.’ Her face covered in a blue beauty mask, Twinkle in the bath is like an avatar of the blue Lord Krishna. Whatever the relevance of the poetry allusion is, her attitude itself is a clear indication that she has no intention to ‘put on his knowledge with his power,’ as she literally stands up against him, letting the book of sonnets drop into the bath water.

When Twinkle and Sanjeev, after their wedding ceremony, finally move into their new house, they begin to find objects left behind by the previous owners. The first they find is ‘a white porcelain effigy of Christ’ (136). The book’s title, ‘This Blessed House,’ already gives the story a religious tone, further emphasized by the religious artefact, and there is a marked intercultural and inter-religious line throughout the text.

The pressures of the relationship have gained most attention in criticism. As has been shown earlier, these pressures are present in the text, highlighted also through the different and even conflicting attitudes Twinkle and Sanjeev take to the findings. After the first discovery, Sanjeev says, referring to both the vinegar and the statue: ‘Throw it away. […] And at the very least get rid of that idiotic statue’ (136). Twinkle is, however, reluctant to throw away


either the vinegar – which she thinks could be used for cooking, although she had never done so – or the statue which ‘could be worth something. Who knows?’ (136). After examining the statue more closely, Twinkle supplements her initial utilitarian explanation with another, aesthetic one: ‘It’s pretty’ (137). Twinkle’s utilitarian moment is significant for she is otherwise quite disorganized and careless with money (141), unlike Sanjeev, who is systematic, cautious, and meticulous (137). But she is determined to have her way and is therefore ready to use even such reasonable means.

Twinkle’s determination to save the statue is puzzling for Sanjeev and causes him to feel resentment:

‘We’re not Christians,’ Sanjeev said. Lately he had begun noticing the need to state the obvious to Twinkle. […]

She shrugged. ‘No, we’re not Christians. We’re good little Hindus.’ (137; emphasis added)

This nagging dialogue could, and has often been, seen as a sign of the tensions between the couple.

I am, however, more inclined to see the dialogue – as well as the circumstances of discovery – in a wider context: that of post-colonial history and diasporic identity. When Twinkle scorns Sanjeev for inherent cultural purity by saying: ‘No, we’re not Christians. We’re good little Hindus,’ she is at the same time resisting a confined, predetermined view of culture and herself. The ironic use of the exclusive and inclusive cultural markers of Christian and Hindu is an indication of Twinkle’s uninhibited, eclectic approach to identity. In Lahiri’s novel Namesake there also occur several instances of such an approach to culture and identity. At one point, for example, the central character Gogol Ganguli reflects on his wife Moushumi who, he considers, ‘had reinvented herself [in Paris], without misgivings, without guilt. He admires her, even resents her a little, for having moved to another country and made a separate life. He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do.’

Gogol is, however, somewhat mistaken as he had been reinventing himself throughout his life, without even having to move to another country. The sheer accident of being born in the United States of Indian parents, the

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inevitable diasporic hybridity, is enough to set him on a continuous course of questioning identity.

**Giving Meaning**

To return to the story, Twinkle’s intense interest in the things they find in the house gives meaning to her life, and for her, ‘Each day is like a treasure hunt’ (141). It is interesting to see what ‘treasures’ Twinkle and Sanjeev find apart from the statue of Christ. The items are:

- ‘a 3-D postcard of Saint Francis done in four colors’ (137),
- ‘a wooden cross key chain’ (137),
- ‘a framed paint-by-number of the three wise men, against a black velvet background’ (137),
- ‘a tile trivet depicting a blond, unbearded Jesus, delivering a sermon on a mountaintop’ (137),
- ‘a plastic snow-filled dome containing a miniature Nativity scene’ (137),
- ‘a larger-than-life-sized watercolour poster of Christ, weeping translucent tears the size of peanut shells and sporting a crown of thorns’ (139),
- ‘switch plates in the bedrooms […] decorated with scenes from the Bible’ (141), and
- ‘a dishtowel that had […] the Ten Commandments printed on it.’ (144)

These items accumulate to form ‘a sizable collection of Christian paraphernalia’ (137) and obtain a special place in the house, much to the regret of Sanjeev, who hates the things. Many of them are placed on the mantelpiece, while others are used in the kitchen. Only the switch plates Sanjeev manages to get rid of by changing them to new ones, for which Twinkle complains about to her friend in California.

The discoveries are a mystery to Twinkle, who asks: ‘“Do you think the previous owners were born-agains?” […] “Or perhaps it is an attempt to convert people”’ (137-8). That Twinkle’s accommodating attitude presents a threat to Sanjeev’s cultural identity is evident in his uncertainty about his wife, which intensifies with the presence of the newly found objects he regards as ‘nonsense’ that the Realtor should take away (138). To Twinkle’s comment on the previous owners’ probable attempt to convert he responds bitterly: ‘Clearly the scheme has succeeded in your case’ (138). Obviously Sanjeev is mistaken in his concern as Twinkle shows no signs of converting. She is not even very much aware of the religion in question, although she regards the previous residents as ‘[h]ighly devout people’ (141).

In his reading of Lahiri’s story, the prolific US writer on Catholicism Paul Elie connects the items, the ‘Christian paraphernalia,’ specifically to Catholicism and ‘the canonical images of modern Catholic kitsch’, relating the story to the changes in the period after the Vatican II Council in 1962-65,
to the ‘browning’ of America and the new immigration. Elie sees in the ‘detached’ way in which Lahiri’s two ‘good little Hindus’ approach the sacred images of this culture, ‘now threatening, now bewildering, now kitschy, now a source of [...] genuine curiosity’, as reminiscent of how, until recently, modern American Catholics, as a marginal, largely immigrant community, may have seen their own religion.

The connection between the histories of Catholics and new immigrants in the United States is in itself an intriguing one. For my purposes, however, it is more suggestive to read especially Twinkle’s curiosity about Christian images in post-colonial terms. Such a reading is not simply an ironic take on the kitschiness of the objects in question. Rather, it regards the textual representation as resistant to hegemonic formations. On the ethnic level, this would mean that the former position of subjugation and subalternity is reversed and the people who had previously been suppressed gain the position of autonomy if not superiority. Before going into a more detailed discussion of this, it needs to be noted here that it is not a question of a historically continuous colonial/post-colonial connection between the United States and India, for example, but a hegemonic hierarchy reworked symbolically in the neo-colonial context. Neither is the achieved position of autonomy or superiority a political or economic position but, again, a symbolic one.

Reversal of Colonial Hierarchy

Thus, Twinkle’s engagement with the Christian images found in their new house works its reversal of colonial hierarchy through several movements such as the four outlined here. Firstly, there is the appropriation: Twinkle takes the things they find as their own since they have bought the house; they belong to them, they are therefore their rightful possessions (and as her remonstration against Sanjeev trying to dispose of the Virgin statue shows, as much hers as his). Secondly, there is the re-presentation: Twinkle exhibits the items on the mantelpiece and elsewhere without bothering about their proper contextual character; they can do anything they please with their possessions. Thirdly, there is the re-interpretation: Twinkle takes the


23 Elie, on-line.
discovery of the items as a sign of the house being ‘blessed’ – ‘Face it. This house is blessed’ (144) – and the idea of their disposal as ‘sacrilegious’ (138); the objects carry no inherent meaning and can be interpreted for example, like here, as markers of general sacredness (which is rather of agnostic kind as the items are not actually treated in a religious or pious manner). Correspondingly, the imperial colonialists appropriated, re-presented, and re-interpreted the colonized India, just like any other colonized cultures, from their own point of view, with their own agendas, and to their own ends. When the post-colonial subject is shown to work within the same parameters, even if only marginally and symbolically, it works towards giving the lie to the foundation of the colonial project. On top of this, in Twinkle’s case, there is also lastly the feminist resistance to the controlled, rationalized, patriarchal structures represented by Sanjeev that penetrate pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial societies.

In my reading, the new house, then, stands for the diasporic location within the recipient culture. Here the diasporic location is understood in Brah’s terms as a diasporic space which ‘includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of “staying put,”’ and in which ‘the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.’ Thus, in Brah’s analysis, the diasporic cultural re-translation can be seen as a transformative process not only to the ‘diasporian’ but also to the ‘native.’

That this reworking of colonial structures happens in such a diasporic location, then, underlines dispersion and new formation of both the neo-colonial forms of subjugation and the post-colonial forms of resistance. The next passage illustrates the strategic character of resistance, which may be described as a fourth movement of reversal:

Behind an overgrown forsythia bush was a plaster Virgin Mary as tall as their waists, with a blue painted hood draped over her head in the manner of an Indian bride. Twinkle grabbed the hem of her T-shirt and began wiping away the dirt staining the statue’s brow.

‘I suppose you want to put her by the foot of our bed,’ Sanjeev said.

She looked at him, astonished. Her belly was exposed, and he saw that there were goose bumps around her navel. ‘What do you think? Of course we can’t put this in our bedroom.’

‘We can’t?’

‘No, silly Sanj. This is meant for outside. For the lawn.’

‘Oh God, no. Twinkle, no.’

‘But we must. It would be bad luck not to.’

‘All the neighbors will see. They’ll think we’re insane.’

‘Why, for having a statue of the Virgin Mary on our lawn? Every other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We’ll fit right in.’

24 Brah, p.181.
25 Brah, p.209; emphasis original.
'We’re not Christians.'
'So you keep reminding me.' (146, emphases added)

Here, the statue of the Virgin Mary as an example of Christian iconography is appropriated and described in Indian terms as ‘an Indian bride.’ She also evades Sanjeev’s ironic remarks both about the placement of the statue brazenly declaring that ‘Of course we can’t put this in our bedroom’ and the repeated negative identification with Christianity by commenting: ‘So you keep reminding me.’ Twinkle’s attitude here is, however, not strictly religious but rather superstitious as she regards not placing the statue on the lawn as bringing ‘bad luck.’ What is more, Twinkle justifies the placing of it in the garden on strategic social grounds, as ‘fitting right in’ in the community, being like neighbours.

In his account of ‘lawn art’ in suburban Boston, Christopher Todd Lynch records the practice of displaying religious artefacts on private spaces: houses, yards, vehicles.26 Just like Twinkle, Lynch sees them positively ‘as more than lawn ornaments’ and this ‘imbues the neighbourhoods with richer personality, bringing identities to the surface and sparking conversation and exchange.’27 The installations he lists are far more varied than Twinkle’s, ‘[i]ncluding saints with gnomes and mermaids’ and ‘the startling contrast of an electric yellow duck next to a solemn blue and white Mary,’28 but the effect is similar. Lynch’s mentioning of one installation with a statue of ‘a Virgin Mary on the half-shell’ resonates directly with Lahiri’s story. There Twinkle admires a ‘transparent decal of the Virgin on the half-shell, as Twinkle liked to call it, adhered to the window in the master bedroom’ (145). That the picture is thus titled because Twinkle ‘liked to call it’ that suggests that it is, rather, something else, most probably a picture of Aphrodite ascending from the billowing sea in Sandro Botticelli’s ‘Birth of Venus’ (1485-86) – or like Twinkle herself raising from her bubble bath as she stands up against Sanjeev (149). Here, then, is also already represented a mixed cultural heritage, re-interpreted by Twinkle in her understanding of Christian mythology. One further such instance of random/partial cultural mixing is in a culinary context when Twinkle prepares a fish stew for which she uses the previously found malt vinegar. She is not particularly fond of cooking – and specifically detests the complicatedness of making Indian food – and so she had made up a recipe for the stew: ‘I just put some things into the pot and added the malt vinegar at the end’ (144). Although Sanjeev ‘had

27 Lynch, on-line.
28 Lynch, on-line.
to admit’ his liking of the tasty, attractive stew, he is bothered about the haphazard way of preparing it, as he would like it to be repeatable, recorded in writing.

**Empty Space vs. Hybrid Space**

One question that has perplexed readers of the story, readers with realistic expectations, has been, why were those items left in the house in the first place? In the story, Sanjeev asks the same from Twinkle: ‘If they’re so precious, then why are they hidden all over the house? Why didn’t they take them with them?’ (138). Elie, while recognizing that the story is not about religion as such, plays with the possible answers and suggests that they were simply abandoned, people ‘shaking the dust of Catholic culture off their boots,’ or that they were left there ‘out of respect,’ or that people who had left in a hurry had considered them inessential, or that they were left there because the people living there had died.\(^ {29} \)

My post-colonial reading of the story does not require an answer to such a question. It would, instead, suggest that the emptiness of the house was illusory to begin with, that the artefacts were not ‘hidden’ nor ‘left behind.’ Analogously, the colonialist, on arriving in the colony, assumed ownership over such things, without even considering the existence of the invisible colonized. Thus, Jyotsna Singh in her book *Colonial Narratives/Colonial Dialogues: ‘Discoveries’ of India in the Language of Colonialism*, writes that the ‘discovery motif has frequently emerged in the language of colonization, enabling European travellers/writers to represent the newly discovered lands as an empty space, a *tabula rasa* on which they could inscribe their linguistic, cultural, and later, territorial claims.’\(^ {30} \) In a diasporic post-colonial situation, as in Lahiri’s story, such discoveries of empty spaces are unattainable – again underlining the falsity of the colonial situation; there never was an ‘empty space.’ Where something analogous to an empty space can be found in diasporic stories, I argue, is in questions of identity, although it is not a space of emptiness but of hybridity.

The final discovery in the story is of ‘a solid silver bust of Christ’ (156). It signifies Twinkle’s final victory over the colonial past, as well as over Sanjeev who

\(^ {29} \) Elie, on-line

hated its immensity, and its flawless, polished surface, and its undeniable value. He hated that it was in his house, and that he owned it. Unlike the other things they’d found, this contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. […] Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it. (156-7, emphases added)

The discovery of the bust represents a victory over the conquered space and time. It is a ‘solid’ trophy for the hybrid diasporic identity. In the end, despite his hatred, Sanjeev sees the ‘undeniable value’ of the object. Like Twinkle, who saw the first statue as pretty, Sanjeev has to admit that the bust had ‘beauty even.’ As the story closes, Sanjeev follows Twinkle, carrying the bust which sports a woman’s feather hat, to place it on the mantelpiece.31 The love-hate relationship exemplifies powerfully the boundaries of diasporic identity; whether you love it or hate it, there is an undeniably valuable thing from the ‘other’ culture taking centre-stage in your own house. Of this duel, Rajeshwar Mittapalli has noted:

What is being dramatized is the clash between assimilation and resistance finally finding its compromise in hybridity. It dawns on Sanjeev that he has to live with the objects signifying an alien faith and culture right in his house for Twinkle’s sake, for the sake of survival in an alien land by appearing to accept its values but actually resisting them.32

While it may be that this portrays accurately Sanjeev’s strategy of survival, Twinkle’s strategy seems to be its reversal: to appropriate and reinterpret these ‘objects signifying an alien faith and culture.’

In Conclusion: What Need Is There for an Interpreter?

In the title story of Interpreter of Maladies there is a direct involvement with the issue of translation of identity when Mr. Kapasi, a tourist guide who also works as an interpreter for a doctor, comments to his client Mrs. Das: ‘we do not face a language barrier. What need is there for an interpreter?’33 The Indian-American Mrs. Das is in India for a visit with her family and wants Mr. Kapasi to sort out a problem in her marriage as she confesses to him that she had been unfaithful to her husband. She tells: ‘I’m tired of feeling so terrible all the time. […] I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you

31 The story is very suggestive of a psychoanalytic reading, too. For example, here in Sanjeev’s feeling of hating the bust exactly because Twinkle loves it, one can perceive a diasporic person’s ambiguous strategy of denial for the hybrid space, for cultural translation, for a reinterpretation of identity.
32 Rajeshwar; emphasis added.
could help me feel better, say the right thing." Mr. Kapasi who has become
ttracted to the woman cannot understand her confiding in him and ‘felt
insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little
secret.’ The act of interpretation fails, eventually, when Mrs. Das is angered
by Mr. Kapasi’s question whether it is really pain, not guilt, she feels. After
this, communication ceases, but for the story it seems that Mr. Kapasi has
made an acute observation and given it an accurate interpretation. In
conclusion, I would say that even if there were no language barriers, if there
were only one language, interpretation is important, if not indispensable.

As I have argued, Lahiri’s story provides an interpretation of the meaning
of hybridity in a post-colonial context. It underlines the centrality of cultural
translation in the process of possessing and re-possessing the past and the
present, both chronological and spatial, in a meaningful way. It also outlines
a strategy of diasporic as well as gendered resistance towards existing
colonial and patriarchal hierarchies in the post-colony. I should like to
conclude with Lahiri’s comment on the importance of fiction in such cultural
translation:

Unlike my parents, I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to
create and illuminate a nonexistent one. Fiction is the foreign land of my choosing, the
place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful. And whether I write as an
American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains
constant: I translate, therefore I am.

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The Hybrid State: Hanif Kureishi and Thatcher’s Britain

Andrew Hammond

Abstract

Although hybridity-theory continues to underpin postcolonial literature and criticism, there have been doubts raised about its ability to challenge dominant ideologies. The work of Hanif Kureishi, a British-Asian novelist, dramatist and screenplay writer, expresses an awareness of the innately hybrid nature of British society, but also a suspicion that hybridity does not necessarily produce a more tolerant or egalitarian society. This is particularly true of the novels and screenplays that Kureishi wrote during the 1980s. Looking at The Buddha of Suburbia, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, The Black Album and particularly My Beautiful Laundrette, this article explores the writer’s questioning of hybridity-theory in the atmosphere of racism, individualism and economic inequality that marked the Thatcher era.

Introduction

Hanif Kureishi is one of the foremost British-Asian writers, whose plays, screenplays, short stories, and novels have helped to redefine the parameters of English literature. As he states: ‘English literature has changed enormously in the last ten years, because of writers from my background […]. You know there are many, many of us, all with these strange names and some kind of colonial background. But we are part of English literature.’¹ He also notes, ‘I’m not a Pakistani or an Indian writer, I’m a British writer.’² The son of a Pakistani father and an English mother, Kureishi grew up as part of the first generation of ‘New Commonwealth’ families to be born in Britain and, as a consequence, encountered the broad antagonism that ethnic minorities then received, suffering such discrimination as a mixed-race schoolboy that he would attempt ‘to deny [his] Pakistani self.’³ The first fifteen years of his career drew heavily on personal experiences of racism. Familiar with cultural and ethnic interaction in the ‘contact zone’ of London, Kureishi explored the identities, difficulties, and adaptations of the Pakistani/Indian diaspora, and analysed the hybridity, or ‘in-betweenness,’ of such immigrant communities. It was his profound re-evaluation of Britishness in an era of immigration and imperial decline that inspired Colin

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MacCabe to term him ‘one of the most important writers of the last twenty-five years’⁴ his work prefiguring the debates about the plural nature of British-Asian identity that later flourished in literature, art, music, film, and dance. With particular reference to My Beautiful Laundrette (1986; premiered 1985), this article will treat the theme of hybridity as addressed in Kureishi’s early fiction and screenplays, focusing on those narratives set during heightened tensions of the Thatcher era.

The concept of ethnic hybridity has become central to discussions of cultural identity in postcolonial theory and literature. The phrase ethnic hybridity, although open to varying interpretations, denotes the way that elements from diverse, seemingly contradictory cultures can, without losing their uniqueness, meet and combine to create a third space of identity – Monika Fludernik gives a good overview of the evolution of the term hybridity, and its links to ‘creolization’ and ‘syncretism.’⁵ Opposed to assimilation, where beliefs and practices are destroyed through contact with a hegemonic culture, hybridisation marks a process by which formations remain intact in new synthesised arrangements, both within an individual and within a wider society. This modern definition of ‘hybridity’ is diametrically opposed to the biological, racialized usage of the nineteenth century. In colonial discourse, the ‘hybrid’ was a symbol of miscegenation and the loss of racial purity, expressing the fear of mixed-race offspring and placing an ethnocentric insistence on the hierarchical separation of racial groupings. In this sense, hybridity-theory offers what many critics view as an emancipatory emphasis on the impossibility of cultural essentialism – the notion that a culture has fixed, authentic features passed down through the generations – and on the porousness of cultural boundaries. The approach is typically found in the literatures of postcolonial regions. With ‘cultural purity […] not on offer’ after European imperial influence,⁶ the postcolonial treatment of subaltern groups offers a syncretic vision of traditional practices merged with aspects of imperial modernity. In a similar way, studies of Western identity formation have rejected the notion of subjectivities as rooted and exclusionary. Homi K. Bhabha, most notably, has explored the disruptive interpenetration of culture that ‘resists any binary opposition of racial and cultural groups’⁷ and that ‘breaks down the symmetry and duality of

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self/other, inside/outside. This is not only manifest in the figure of the hybrid, a reminder of cultural transgression, but also in the ambivalent, contradictory discourse on self and other found in colonial texts. As Deborah Madsen comments, hybridity-theory aims ‘to challenge and resist the false concepts of cultural purity and authenticity that serve the interests of the colonizer.’ Indeed, Bhabha’s notion of hybridity departs from that of earlier theorists in that its emphasis is less on material or social practices than on textual processes, viewing these as ‘a problematic of colonial representation […] that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority.’ He also writes that hybridisation ‘reveals the ambivalence […] of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention.’

Doubts about Hybridity

Although hybridity remains a pivotal area of debate, the last fifteen years have seen doubts emerge about the theory’s emancipatory potential. Under question is not the plurality of a given society, or the need for societies to acknowledge their plurality, but rather the idea that hybridisation marks a sufficient step forward from past injustices. To begin with, critics express reservations about the celebratory air that pervades much of the debate, concerned that hybridity-theory ‘presupposes an evolutionary hierarchy’ from the exclusionary practices of the nineteenth century to the vital, transgressive ‘hybrid’ of the twentieth-first century in a manner that overlooks continuing racial inequality. Linked to this are queries regarding the nature, or composition, of the cultural formations that compose the hybrid state. To speak of two cultural forms merging to form a hybrid third – the argument runs – risks constructing the original forms as stable, monolithic entities grounded in opposition or difference. For example, after noting that ‘[c]reolisation and hybridisation are [typically] conceived of as revolutionary antidotes to essentialist constructs,’ Ayse Caglar argues that the processes

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8 Bhabha, p.116.
10 Bhabha, p.156.
11 Bhabha, p.145.
‘presume […] a prior ontological difference between cultures’ and a notion of ‘bounded ethnicities and territories’ that denies cultural fluidity.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, Robert J. C. Young writes that ‘hybridisation assumes […] the prior existence of pure, fixed and separate antecedents.’\textsuperscript{14}

Put in the context of Kureishi’s work, to what extent does discussion of merger between ‘Pakistani’ and ‘British’ culture reduce a multiplicity of subjectivities to simplified, bounded wholes? Upon making the point, Caglar’s research raises another objection to hybridity-theory, one that this article will choose to focus upon. This is the question of whether ethnic syncretism presents any challenge to power relations in other fields of social activity, with Caglar remarking that, even if it problematizes cultural essentialism, this does not mean that ‘creolised forms and identities […] destabilise existing hierarchies’: ‘Subversion on one level may produce segregation at another.’\textsuperscript{15} One cannot assume, in other words, that the elements undergoing hybridisation are wholly virtuous or that they combat such absolutist ideologies as sexism, homophobia or class division.

In this article, I will argue that, in Kureishi’s engagements with the British political landscape of the 1980s, he is often pessimistic about the concept’s potential to challenge the period’s mounting injustices. It was in this decade, of course, that Britain was beset – in Paul Gilroy’s phrase – by a virulent ‘ethnic absolutism.’\textsuperscript{16} After the conservative victory in 1979, there was a swing to the right under Margaret Thatcher, with the rise of anti-unionism, individualism, nationalism, as well as the increasing tendency to associate national identity with whiteness. In a televised election speech in 1978, Thatcher expressed anxieties about the nation being ‘swamped’ by ‘people of a different culture,’\textsuperscript{17} the British Nationality Bill of 1981 disputed Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigration, and Norman Tebbit pursued a xenophobic ‘assimilationist project’ against what he saw as the disintegration of British culture.\textsuperscript{18} In the light of such racialized public discourse, with its desire for a monolingual, monocultural Britain, it is little wonder that ethnic

\textsuperscript{15} Caglar, p.173.
\textsuperscript{17} Margaret Thatcher, BBC Panorama Interview (Feb. 1978). Qtd. in Intercom: A Newsletter (Population Reference Bureau) (May 1978), 2-3 (p.3).
tension grew. These were the years of racist assault, heightened immigration controls, inner-city riots in Southall, Brixton, St Paul’s and elsewhere, and anger about intrusive policing and rising unemployment. As a result, the movement against racism began to develop, fronted by organisations such as Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi-League, and assisted by the attempts of various city councils to accommodate the needs of ethnic minorities. For migrant or diasporic communities, however, these remained difficult times. Britain seemed less an ‘in-between space’ of creativity and self-liberation, as postcolonial theorists have in part evoked the migrant experience, than a place of conflict and ethnic separation. Indeed, in an essay from 1991, at the end of the Thatcher era, David Dabydeen is scathing of ‘cosy terms’ such as ‘[c]ultural diversity,’ commenting that London might well be ‘culturally diverse, but there is little cross-fertilisation of cultures taking place.’

A Funny Kind of Breed

In his fictional work, Kureishi’s history of the 1980s began in The Buddha of Suburbia (1990), a novel that is considered by many as his greatest achievement. In frenetic, exuberant prose, the story relates the picaresque adventures of Karim Amir, a suburban teenager born of an Indian father and an English mother who, after his father’s infidelities cause the break-up of the family, attempts to find solace in a hedonistic lifestyle of drugs, pop culture and sexual experimentation. For the most part, Karim’s growing up is done in the 1970s, when ethnic diversification is putting a strain on race relations with ‘neo-fascist groups […] beating Asians and shoving shit and burning rags through their letter-boxes’ and when ethnic minorities are searching for new identity and belonging. The evocation of a plural Britain is conducted through each of Kureishi’s British-Indian characters. Karim, for example, is foregrounded at the opening as the hybrid product of disparate Anglo-Indian traditions:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don’t care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it) […]. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (BS 3)

20 Hanif Kureishi, The Buddha of Suburbia (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.56. Hereafter referred to in the text, preceded by BS.
In these famous opening lines, Kureishi offers a powerful description of internal syncretism, as well as a challenge to racist representations of the ‘hybrid’ (‘a funny kind of [...] breed’). The repetition of ‘Englishman’ also re-negotiates the traditional conception and lineage of British nationhood. After foregrounding hybridity at the outset, however, the novel goes on to express doubts about its capacity, most notably in the way that characters either renounce Indian identity or internalise Western images of that identity. Karim’s father might appear a loyal advocate of Eastern culture, teaching mystical philosophy in the London suburbs, yet his lifestyle is synthetic, being ‘a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist’ (BS 16) who exoticises the East for social and sexual advancement. The father says, late in the novel, that he ‘will never be anything but an Indian,’ yet he has no wish ‘to see [his] origins again’ and confesses that it has now become ‘an imagined India’ (BS 263, 64, 74).

As his name suggests, the Indian immigrant, Changez, who comes to Britain for an arranged marriage, proves himself so adept at ‘tak[ing] up the English ways’ (BS 210) that there is little left of his Indian heritage. His wife, Jamila, despite being involved in community-spirited protest, spends much of the time rebelling against her traditionalist father (a believer in ‘absolute patriarchal authority’ [BS 64]) and involving herself in sexual affairs and in studies of Western literature. Of all the characters, however, Karim is most vulnerable to the forces of enculturation. Through his determined hedonism, he appears both embedded in Western individualism and its patterns of consumption, and resistant to any genuine cross-fertilisation of cultural traditions, a point emphasised by his offensive enactment of Mowgli in a theatrical version of The Jungle Book. In this way, Western culture proves itself to be a predatory formation that, far from combining democratically with others, destroys what it encounters. The mood of despair underlining the narrative increases with the election of 1979, the symbolic start to the 1980s. As the Callaghan administration crumbles, there is an increase in ‘strikes, marches, wage-claims’ (BS 259), but also an emergence of that representative figure of the decade, the yuppie: ‘fashion designers, photographers, graphic artists [and] shop designers,’ all of them ‘smartly dressed,’ with ‘short hair, white shirts and [...] braces’ (BS 270). On election night, as news comes through of ‘who was going to be the next Prime Minister’ (BS 282), Karim’s decision to take a role in a television soap opera and sudden interest in ‘money-power’ (BS 283) marks his final absorption into the materialism that would define the coming decade. Not only does he exhibit little desire for hybridity, but he also lacks any sense of social or political responsibility. He admits, for example, to not knowing Punjabi or Urdu, and to not having visited the Indian sub-continent (BS 140-1). Later in the novel, he realises that he has been ‘denying’ his Indian self, and feels ‘ashamed and incomplete.
[...], as if half of me were missing,’ but even then he talks superficially about the ‘personality bonus of an Indian past’ (BS 212-3).

Kureishi’s analysis of hybridity was even more pessimistic in two screenplays from the 1980s, My Beautiful Laundrette (1985) and Sammy and Rosie Get Laid (1988). Although revealing, through pastiche and intertextuality, a cinematic awareness, the screenplays are primarily a product of Kureishi’s early training in the theatre, being grounded in dialogue, character, and extended symbolism: as Kenneth Kaleta argues, their principal ‘aim is to create literature.’ In his Introduction to My Beautiful Laundrette, Kureishi adds: ‘As Laundrette was the first film I’d written, and I was primarily a playwright, I wrote each scene of the film like a little scene for a play, with the action written like stage directions and with lots of dialogue. Then I’d cut most of the dialogue and add more [...] action.’

Limits of Hybridity

The first and most important of these two texts, My Beautiful Laundrette, was directed by Stephen Frears in 1985 and earned the writer an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay. It follows the fortunes of Omar, a young Anglo-Pakistani who attempts to succeed in business amidst the racial bigotry and violence of the era, working his way up from washing cars to managing a successful laundrette. In this, he is assisted by Nasser, an unscrupulous uncle accumulating considerable wealth from a chain of businesses and properties, and by Salim, a relative whose business dealings include more dubious enterprise. The screenplay’s marginalisation of white characters and determined focus on the extended Pakistani family – with almost all scenes set in either family homes or Nasser’s properties – leave one in no doubt about the hybrid nature of contemporary Britain. The Pakistani diaspora – the family’s holdings articulate – is not only a presence in Britain but also a major power base. This sense of hybridisation increases when Omar, rejecting his father’s advice to find ‘a nice girl,’ begins a homosexual affair with Johnny, a working-class white boy (often ‘the only white person in sight’) who has had a history of indiscipline at school and of involvement with a neo-fascist gang. Emerging out of apparently dichotomous communities, their developing relationship, and co-operation in refurbishing the laundrette, marks an apparent breaking-down of ethnic

21 Kaleta, p.61.
23 Hanif Kureishi, My Beautiful Laundrette (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp.12 and 57. Hereafter referred to in the text, preceded by MBL.
boundaries, a merging of cultural formations that works against essential, pure identities, as well as against class divisions. Indeed, the love scenes which sprinkle the text form a powerful affirmation of the possibilities of inter-ethnic harmony. It was partly *My Beautiful Laundrette* that Stuart Hall had in mind when he talked of the pluralisation ‘going on, unevenly, everywhere’ in the media during the 1980s, with television bringing into ‘the domestic sanctuaries of British living rooms’ the ‘unwelcome message of cultural hybridisation.’ The creation of Channel Four in 1982, then, with its commitment to ‘minority’ expression, ‘had a profound effect on the formations of Black and Asian film production.’

Yet despite surface impressions, there are severe limits to the text’s vision of a hybridised nation. The developing rapport between Omar and Johnny might supply the narrative momentum, but it is the screenplay’s evocation of ethnic intolerance, shadowing the two lovers at every stage of their relationship, that forms its most emotive and memorable feature. The neo-fascist gang, most obviously, are a stark portrayal of far-right extremism: composed of four unemployed youths, they spend their time loitering in the streets with their ‘right-wing newspapers [and] badges’ (MBL 13) and menacing Omar’s family with a constant stream of racist abuse. In an early scene, Omar, Salim, and his wife, Cherry, are stuck at a traffic lights in their car and find the gang crowding around to ‘bang on it and shout,’ becoming increasingly alarmed when one ‘climbs on the bonnet […] and squashes his arse grotesquely against the windscreen’ (MBL 23). In another scene, when Omar questions the ironically named Genghis, the gang leader, on Johnny’s whereabouts, he is told to ‘[g]et back to the jungle, wog boy,’ a blunt projection of unenlightened savagery (MBL 29). For Genghis, there should not only be a clear hierarchy maintained between ‘races,’ but also a strict division of labour, a proscription which, in post-imperial Britain, repeats the injustices of colonial economics and sets rigid boundaries between social groupings. When he discovers that Johnny is working for Omar, Genghis declares that he hates ‘to see one of our men grovelling to Pakis. They came here to work for us. That’s why we brought them over’ (MBL 38). The claim, with its strict division between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ leads on to his injunction to Johnny: ‘Don’t cut yourself off from your own people. Because there’s no one else who really wants you. Everyone has to belong’ (MBL 38). The

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discourse of racial segregation represents a constant threat to Omar and Johnny’s relationship, not so much physically, for they determine to stay together, but on a deeper, more psychological level, where the two are shown to have absorbed the hostility that surrounds them. In Omar’s case, this emerges most poignantly on the opening day of the refurbished laundrette. Settled in his lover’s embrace, his mood suddenly sours and he angrily recounts his father’s disappointment at seeing Johnny, who he had helped as a boy, participate in racist marches in London. ‘[W]hat were they doing?’ he cries:

What were they doing on marches through Lewisham? It was bricks and bottles and Union Jacks. It was immigrants out. It was kill us. People we knew. And it was you. He saw you marching. You saw his face, watching you. Don’t deny it. We were there when you went past. (MBL 43)

Although the ‘harshness’ of Omar’s manner is soon assuaged, the abruptness and violence of the speech, with its emotive, staccato rhythms, reveals a depth of bitterness underlying his affection, as does a later remark to Johnny about how, ‘at school, you and your lot kicked me all round the place’ (MBL 51). In his behaviour, Omar might appear a model of hybridity, but emotionally he has not recovered from the personal experience of racial enmity, and there is a side of him that maintains that enmity on the level of resentment. As Karim in The Buddha of Suburbia says of the non-white population, ‘to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment […]. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were generated afresh every day?’ (BS 227). For Johnny, similarly, the past cannot be easily erased through love. His response to a second reminder of how he has been involved in National Front activity – that he ‘want[s] to forget all of those things’ (MBL 38) – suggests a concealment, rather than a dissolution, of ethnic divisions, and thus acknowledges that those divisions persist.

The difficulties that Omar has in transcending racial antagonism are due not only to the behaviour of the white community, but also to the anger towards that behaviour felt by the Pakistani community. Amongst many examples in kind, one of Nasser’s business associates refers to the generic ‘racist Englishman’ (MBL 21) and Papa, Omar’s father, complains to his son that ‘They hate us in England. And all you do is kiss their arses and think of yourself as a little Britisher’ (MBL 25). One can assume that such antagonism influences Omar’s view of white Britain, particularly when the family’s anger tips into racism. Cherry, for example, appears at first a hybrid creation, being ‘Anglo-Indian’ by birth and effusive about the social life of Karachi, where extended family gatherings are centred round ‘bridge, booze and VCR’ (MBL 19). Yet her enjoyment of Western patterns of leisure is only a superficial absorption of British mores. Upon hearing that Omar has never been to
Pakistan, she laments that ‘anyone in their right mind [could] call this silly little island off Europe their home’ and claims to be ‘sick of hearing about these in-betweens,’ believing that ‘[p]eople should make up their minds where they are’ (MBL 19-20). The same ethnocentrism which repeats Genghis’s belief in cultural exclusivity is also present in Salim. When Omar agrees to work in Nasser’s garage, Salim expresses satisfaction that the boy will now ‘be with [his] own people’ (MBL 15), and later, in a moment of anger, he accuses Omar of having ‘too much white blood,’ a factor which has ‘made [him] weak like those pale-faced adolescents that call us wog’ (MBL 28). For Salim, it is a short step from these anxieties over ethnic purity to acts of aggressive revenge on white people. The most powerful instance is when Salim gets his own back on the gang for their earlier attack on his car. Driving back with Omar and Johnny from a party at Nasser’s house, he spies Genghis and his colleagues in the street. ‘These people,’ he says to Johnny, accelerating towards them:

What a waste of life. They’re filthy and ignorant. They’re just nothing. But they abuse people. […] All over England, Asians, as you call us, are beaten, burnt to death. Always we are intimidated. What these scum need […] is a taste of their own piss. (MBL 61)

The assault, which results in injury to a gang member’s foot, mirrors white belligerence, differing from the latter only by being more successfully executed. Lacking the tolerance and fluidity of the hybrid selfhood, Salim encapsulates the screenplay’s sense that the plurality of Britain’s ethnic composition has had little positive benefit either to the society at large or to individual relations. In this context, Mireille Rosello’s notion that in Britain ‘hybridity […] seems historically inevitable,’26 and her confidence that individuals can ‘disidentify with a national or ethnic community’27 seem naively optimistic. Although Omar and Johnny manage to maintain their relationship against the wishes of their communities, their ties to those communities remain powerful, with Omar always drifting back to the family, and Johnny to the gang, the two sporadically separated by residual loyalties within them.

**Need of Radical Language**

Kureishi’s pessimism about integration becomes even clearer in bringing out the many other shortcomings that Omar’s family have. Although he

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27 Rosello, p.3.
condemns white racism against immigrant populations, Kureishi refuses to view the British-Pakistani community as a straightforward victim of hegemonic prejudice, or to succumb to the crude idealisation that this would entail. Commenting on the anger of British-Asians at the screenplay’s representation of them ‘as drug dealers, sodomites and mad landlords,’ Kureishi spoke of how ‘I don’t pretend to be a spokesman for the Asian community, and they shouldn’t expect me to do PR for them.’

As John Hill comments on the film version, ‘*My Beautiful Laundrette* does not flatter Asians in Britain’: ‘the Asian characters […] engender complex responses as they are neither “positive” in terms of behaviour and attitudes nor especially sympathetic […] to either left-wing or right-wing audiences.’ Furthermore, Hill also points out that ‘[t]hese films do not attempt to give expression to one “authentic” or “essential” “black” or “Asian” experience, or offer straightforwardly “positive” images, but rather place the stress upon heterogeneity.’

Also Stuart Hall commends the film’s ‘refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized […] always and only “positive.”’

To begin with, the family reveals a strain of masculinist sentiment that borders on homophobia. The concerns that Papa has over Omar’s lack of a wife, wondering aloud whether ‘his penis is in full working order’ (*MBL* 12), is repeated by Nasser, whose determination to marry Omar off becomes insistent after he catches him once too often with Johnny, challenging his bachelor status with the phrase, ‘Your penis works, doesn’t it?’ (*MBL* 46). The sexual anxieties of the older generation, which prevent Omar from admitting his love, are combined with an unshakeable belief in the rectitude of male power. The ‘confident and powerful’ Nasser is the paragon of patriarchal authority, a kind of godfather to the family’s business doings, as well as a tyrant in the home, where his daughters have been ‘trained’ to look after him (*MBL* 48, 12). As a corollary of this, the females of the family tend to be passive, long-suffering figures, as seen in Nasser’s wife Bilquis, a ‘shy’ and ‘uncertain’ woman who is expected to endure her husband’s extra-marital affair (with a white mistress, Rachel) with equanimity. Tania, their eldest daughter, is similarly oppressed by family life and, although more vocal about her frustrations, especially about her father’s determination to find a male relative ‘to take over the businesses’ (*MBL* 22), her final decision to flee the family home appears more a gesture of defeat than of liberation.

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28 Ranasinha, p.49
30 Hill, p.209.
Such shortcomings raise two problems with the tenets of hybridity-theory. On the one hand, Kureishi’s characterisation of Nasser, Tania, and Omar emphasises that Pakistani diasporic identity, far from being a single, stable ethnicity that can merge harmoniously with British cultural formations, is a heterogeneous compound of gender, sexuality, nationality, class, and generation, the syncretic products of which are just as likely to resist, or be absorbed by, Western convention. On the other hand, the family’s sexism and homophobia, mirroring the masculinism of the neo-fascist gang, suggests that there is not the ontological difference between the communities that hybridity-theory would have us suppose, and raises the question of what positive benefits their merger might have.

These problems are brought to a head in the business activities of the family, a realm in which hybridisation is replaced by wholesale assimilation. There is something of an irony in the fact that Nasser and Salim, their wealth, ambition, and empire-building, fully embody the materialist ideology of a right-wing administration that showed a marked disrespect for ethnic minorities. As a first-generation Pakistani immigrant, Nasser rejects his country of origin, where religion ‘is beginning to interfere with the making of money,’ and announces a willingness to ‘drink to Thatcher,’ who has made Britain into ‘a little heaven’ where ‘you can get anything you want’ (MBL 66, 37, 66, 17). As he goes on: ‘It’s all spread out and available. That’s why I believe in England. You just have to know how to squeeze the tits of the system’ (MBL 17). The assertion, which repeats the feminisation of appropriated territory found in colonial discourse, is dramatised by the process of ‘unscrewing,’ Nasser’s term for the breaking of the locks on doors of unwanted tenants prior to eviction. Commencing the narrative’s cycle of violence, the screenplay opens with Salim and four Jamaican bailiffs hauling Johnny and Genghis from a house that Salim has recently bought at auction, a stark metaphor for the family’s incursion into white space. For John Kirk, the scene also expresses how many amongst the white working class find ‘no place […] in the entrepreneurial environment created by Thatcherism and capitalized upon by Salim and Nasser’: this is a London ‘given over to, and expropriated by, those with the power to speculate and accumulate,’ Salim, for example, goes so far as to claim that Pakistani enterprise is ‘keeping this damn country in the black’ (MBL 14).

Later, when Johnny is helping Nasser evict a poor Pakistani poet from a lodging, his comment that it seems wrong for ‘Pakis […] to hustle other people’s lives’ is met with the reply: ‘we’re professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis. There’s no race question in the new enterprise

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33 Kirk, p.172.
culture’ (MBL 41). In the film, Johnny’s rejoinder – ‘It’s hardly integration, is it?’ – serves to underline the fact that this is less hybridisation than a ruthless fight between ethnicities for the possession of the nation’s wealth. In this struggle, Omar is almost as ruthless as the uncle who trains and nurtures him. A portrait of individualism run wild, Omar is the representative figure of Thatcherist economics who will do anything for personal advancement, including stealing money from family members, selling narcotics, breaking into houses and – most significantly – coming to neglect his bed-bound, alcoholic father. In early sections of the screenplay, Omar affectionately cooks and cleans for Papa; such scenes quickly peter out, however, when Omar’s ambition grows and he starts to renounce the ‘close-bonding,’ ‘intimacy’ and ‘supportive common life’ that Kureishi views as staples of the Pakistani family.34 The attainment of material success seems more important even than his relationship with Johnny. In one scene, Omar realises that his lover has left the laundrette early, and furiously berates him at his flat:

OMAR: […] Laundrettes are a big commitment. Why aren’t you at work?
JOHNNY: It’ll be closing time soon. You’ll be locking the place up, and coming to bed.
OMAR: No, it never closes. And one of us has got to be there. That way we begin to make money.
JOHNNY: You’re getting greedy.
OMAR: I want big money. I’m not gonna be beat down by this country. When we were at school, you and your lot kicked me all round the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor. That’s how I like it. Now get to work. Get to work I said. Or you’re fired! (MBL 51)

The image of a white man working for a British-Asian (doing a ‘[v]ariety of menial things’ [MBL 30]) may invert the colonial hierarchy, but fails to challenge the injustice and economic disparity which that hierarchy represented, raising doubts about multiculturalism’s revolutionary potential. It is significant that in Omar’s class discourse, with its emphasis on ‘work,’ ‘big money’ and authoritarian labour relations, Johnny’s reference to love (‘coming to bed’) is ignored. It is scenes like this, in fact, that lead one to question whether Omar and Johnny have developed any personal syncretism at all. So great is Omar’s absorption of Western values that there seems little else to him: his grasp of Urdu is only ‘rudimentary’ (MBL 57), he knows nothing of life in Pakistan, ‘a place [he’s] never been’ (MBL 34), he exhibits no Islamic religious or cultural values, and he generally ‘forfèit[s] family traditions.’35 Kaleta also comments that ‘Nasser abandons eastern traditions. He takes on British values with the same gusto with which he acquires a British mistress. Nasser’s home life, especially his relationship with his

34 Kureishi, ‘Rainbow’, pp.37, 39.
35 Kaleta, p.184.
brother, suggests that he also feels loss – but the entrepreneurial dream is foremost in Nasser’s mind.’\(^{36}\) Similarly, although Johny conducts a relationship with Omar, there is not a single feature of British-Pakistani culture that he incorporates, or even reveals an awareness of, and there is a sense in which he can only strike up the relationship with Omar because the latter has become a fully-fledged Westerner: a secular capitalist. Certainly, Johny stands up for Salim at the end of the screenplay, an action that could be interpreted as an absorption of the Pakistani community’s belief in family loyalty. Yet it is more likely due to his general renunciation of violence. When asked by Nasser to ‘unscrew,’ for example, he insists that ‘I don’t do nothing rough no more’ and that ‘I’m not hurting nobody’ (MBL 37, 40). It is not the merging of cultures, but the dominance of one that makes their relationship possible; not because of mutual hybridity, but because of its absence. Thus, Donald Weber, discussing Bhabha reference to the ‘empowering condition of hybridity,’ doubts whether ‘any of Kureishi’s characters/subjects’ arrive at such a condition.’\(^{37}\)

The argument is forcibly made in the most celebrated scene in the text, the laundrette’s grand opening. After some industrious refurbishment, Omar and Johny have transformed the place into a clean, modern premises – with ‘pot plants,’ ‘a sound system’ and everything painted ‘in a bright high-tech style’ (MBL 42-3) – and have arranged an opening ceremony to mark their success. As the two men make love in the back office before the guests arrive, unbeknown to them, Nasser and Rachel enter the laundrette and, believing they are alone, begin to dance to the music on the sound system. In the film version, the scene is shot from the rear of the office, the camera looking across the young, mixed-race homosexual couple in the foreground through a two-way mirror to the older, mixed-race heterosexual couple in the background, thus drawing together into one textual moment multiple mergers of race, class, sexuality, and generation. The laundrette has consequently been read as a utopian space, one distinct from racist Britain, where boundaries and prejudices are broken down and where transgressive identities find freedom of expression. The fact that this is a place of cleansing, where the two couples seem to be purified from racial or sexual prejudice, has also been emphasised. Yet is the laundrette that positive a symbol? It can more easily be understood as a metaphor for the impossibility of escaping the enterprise culture that dominated the 1980s: the business is, after all, the product of individualism and entrepreneurship, and reflects the Thatcherite emphasis both on the service industry and – in the form of Omar and Johny – on hierarchical labour relations. As Nasser puts it, the laundrette and

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\(^{36}\) Kaleta, p.196.

The Hybrid State

Thatcherism are as compatible as ‘dall and chipatis!’ (MBL 37). With its hanging ferns, aquariums, and piped music, and its ‘huge pink flashing neon sign’ outside (MBL 47), the laundrette is also a vulgar and materialistic showpiece, illustrative of the decade’s obsession with ostentation and garish display. The point is underlined by the usage of old church pews for seating (business now being the religion of middle-class Britain) and by Omar’s financing of the laundrette by money siphoned from Salim’s drug-trafficking (a Brechtian analogy between business and crime). Significantly, the violence that erupts at the end of the screenplay, when Genghis’s gang avenge Salim’s earlier assault by beating him to within an inch of his life, takes place outside the laundrette, making the property as much a symbol of alienation as of merger. In this way, the screenplay avoids the naïve evolutionism of the hybrid narrative, by which past divisions are triumphantly erased through contact and union. Although the text ends with Omar washing the wounds that Johnny has received during the fight, the fact that characters continue to require cleansing indicates the persistence of racial hostility and fails to bring closure to the explosion of violence that has occurred. Once again, the screenplay insists that the stains of the past will not easily be washed away.

The laundrette, it should be remembered, is the location where Omar expresses anger about Johnny’s former involvement in neo-fascism, where Nasser insists on Omar’s marriage to Tania, and where Tania and Rachel argue over Nasser’s infidelities (MBL 46).

The failure of Omar and Johnny’s cross-cultural relationship to effect wider social change reiterates the doubts expressed in academic debate about hybridisation as a force for change. For many critics, integration and multiculturalism are valuable, necessary ideals, but have often failed to oppose sexual inequality and economic injustice, for which a wider political programme, specifically one grounded in left-wing activism, is required. As John Hutnyk asks, ‘why talk hybridity now rather than a more explicitly radical language?’

On the frequent erasure of Marxism from postcolonial debate, Hutnyk goes on to say that ‘hybridity-talk’ shifts

attention from the urgency of anti-racist politics in favour of middle-class conservative success stories in the Thatcher-with-a-bindi-spot mould. [...] Theorising hybridity becomes, in some cases, an excuse for ignoring sharp organisational questions, enabling a passive and comfortable – if linguistically sophisticated – intellectual quietism.

As a partial response to such queries, My Beautiful Laundrette dramatises, through the character of Papa, the increasingly depleted status of the left during the struggles of the Thatcher era. Emerging from a ‘rich and powerful’

38 Hutnyk, p.122.
39 Hutnyk, p.122.
family (MBL 28), this ‘leftist communist Pakistani’ (MBL 21) had been a well-known journalist in Bombay, a popular cohort of politicians and a personal friend of Bhutto in Pakistan. His broadly humanist philosophy is demonstrated by his fondness for those professions – the ‘politician,’ the ‘[j]ournalist,’ the ‘trade unionist’ (MBL 53) – which he believes can challenge global capitalism, as well as by his advocacy of education as a tool for political transformation, emphasising the necessity of ‘knowledge […] to see clearly what’s being done and to whom in this country’ (MBL 53). His ideals are summarised in his catch-phrase, ‘education is power’ (MBL 18) and in his constant attempts to advise and assist Johnny and Omar. Reflecting the decline of the left, however, Papa has become a shrunken, dishevelled figure, and the fact that none amongst the younger generation listen to him, but prefer the get-rich-quick schemes of Nasser, his symbolic opposite, articulates a wider scepticism about the possibilities of oppositional politics. As Papa comments, apropos the rise of fascism amongst the urban poor: ‘the working class are such a great disappointment to me’ (MBL 53). For Kureishi, the weakness of the socialist movement was compounded by the manifestation of racism within the Labour Party, as well as by the movement’s tendency towards sexism.40 As revealed later in the screenplay, Papa fails to accommodate women into his humanist vision, having taken out on Omar’s mother his frustrations regarding British intolerance and his loss of professional status, an action that results in her suicide. As a consequence, this ‘medieval Christ’ (MBL 11), who appears distinct from other characters through his determined pursuit of truth and justice, offers no solution to the malaise, leading some critics to lament Kureishi’s tendency to censure ‘eighties culture without the concomitant political commitment.’41 Papa had a forebear in the character of Terry in The Buddha of Suburbia, an impoverished actor and enthusiastic Trotskyite who works ardently for the working-class revolution, but who finally sells out by taking on the role of a policeman in a television series.

Conclusion

The paralysis of the left, and the shortcomings of hybridity-theory, gain further analysis in Kureishi’s writings from the later 1980s and 1990s. Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, published in the year of Thatcher’s third election victory, is even bleaker than My Beautiful Laundrette, the screenplay pervaded by the race riots, poverty, unemployment and brutal property

41 Ranasinha, p.17.
speculation that nine years of ultra-right government had facilitated. And in *The Black Album* (1995), Kureishi’s farewell to the 1980s, an additional hindrance to ethnic harmony was introduced. Set in 1989, the novel not only addresses the collapse of the former Soviet bloc, what one character refers to as ‘the twilight of Communism’\(^{42}\) but also the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and the rise of religious fundamentalism. The narrative follows the fortunes of Shahid Hassan, a young college student whose arrival in North London from the suburbs of Kent launches him, as with Karim, into a picaresque quest for mature identity. As with Omar’s choice between his father’s socialism and his uncle’s materialism, Shahid’s quest is structured around two clear alternatives. On the one hand, he is drawn to the white, liberal English lecturer, Deedee Osgood, who teaches him in the ways of openness and free expression, but whose mentorship leads only to the empty sensuality of postmodern Western culture.\(^{43}\) On the other hand, he meets a group of Islamic fundamentalists – led by the shadowy Riaz – which offers the consolations of moral structure and secure identity. Although the latter fight admirably against white racism (which includes beatings, domestic attacks, and a level of bullying that had the young Shahid ‘defecat[ing] with fear’ [*BA* 73]), the narrative charts the protagonist’s gradual disaffection with religious orthodoxy. Its strictures against sensual pleasure, its belief in separatism and cultural purity, and its unthinking dogmatism, allowing ‘no splinter of imagination into their body of belief, for that would poison all, rendering their conviction human, aesthetic, fallible’ (*BA* 143), all come to a head in the group’s burning of Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and attempted assault on Deedee, who has called in the police against them. When set beside its wider atmosphere of terrorist attacks and mounting fear, the novel gives dramatic weight to Kureishi’s thoughts on Muslim militancy expressed in non-fictional writings. Here, although finding worth in Anglo-Pakistani culture generally, he considers the turn to fundamentalism an ‘aberration’ and ‘a symptom of extreme alienation,’ bemoaning its ‘medieval’ structures of thought and its belief in the ‘innately inferior position of women.’\(^{44}\) Kureishi has also explored the theme of fundamentalism in *My Son the Fanatic* (1997).

At the tail-end of ‘the longest, hardest century of racism in […] history’ (*BA* 12), here was another blow struck for antipathy and exclusivity. As with earlier works, the solution is found neither in the disempowered left, represented by Deedee’s husband who, upon hearing of the Eastern European

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43 On the universalism and dogmatism of Deedee’s world-view, see Moore-Gilbert, pp.140-3.

revolutions, is reduced to helpless stuttering, nor in the protagonist. Although Shahid’s quest leads him to realise an abstract syncretism (‘There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world’ [BA 274]), he evolves no political agenda, and fails to determine how the cultural divisions examined in the novel are to be overcome. Again, like Karim, he chooses individualism over political commitment, demonstrating what Kureishi in *Intimacy* termed ‘that eighties cynicism.’ One character in *Intimacy* talks of ‘a Thatcherism of the soul that imagines that people are not dependent on one another. In love, these days, it is a free market; browse and buy, pick and choose […]. There’s no sexual or social security.’

The tendency of Kureishi’s protagonists to gravitate towards Western models of behaviour, and his frequent intransigence towards Islamicist ideologies, have led to criticism of his early work. For Ruvani Ranasinha, the author ‘homogenizes’ the Muslim community, concealing its broad diversity of faith and practice, while also – through images of intolerance and sexism – ‘conforms to the stereotypes he ostensibly challenges.’ And for Bart Moore-Gilbert, Kureishi might explore hybridity as a theme, but his literary discourse is worryingly Eurocentric, with little reference to postcolonial literatures, little dramatisation of non-Western societies and little usage of dialectical forms other than Standard Received English, eschewing postcolonial polyphony for a more hegemonic postmodernism. Elleke Boehmer argues that ‘the writing most often called “truly” hybrid […] is that which has successfully bridged the gap between Third and First Worlds, and established itself at the centre’ and the authors’ ‘connections with their Third World background have become chiefly metaphorical,’ used merely ‘to furnish images for their art’ in a way that mirrors ‘the time-worn processes through which those in the West scrutinize the Other.’

While accepting the validity of such criticism, Kureishi’s achievements are many, particularly his dramatisation of the sheer enormity of the contemporary crisis. In Omar’s enculturation, in Shahid’s individualism and in the socialist Papa’s disempowerment, there is not so much a championing of modern bourgeois values, but a recognition of just how difficult it is to maintain autonomy and political agency in an age of global capital. Rejecting naïve optimism, Kureishi’s technique is to present the nature and scale of the problem and to leave the reader to ponder the possible solution. However, the underlining message of his work is the need for tolerance and understanding

47 Ranasinha, p.89.
in an inescapably hybrid Britain, for ‘learn[ing] that being British isn’t what it was’\(^50\) even if this seemed unlikely in the turbulent mood of the 1980s.

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\(^50\) Kureishi, ‘Rainbow’ p.55.
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Performing British Hybridity: Fix Up and Fragile Land

Valerie Kaneko Lucas

Abstract

This article considers the negotiation of hybrid cultural identities by Black Britons and British Asians in two plays: Fix Up by actor and writer Kwame Kwei-Armah and Fragile Land by British Asian writer Tanika Gupta. Fix-Up discusses the search for historical roots and Black identity in an era where these longed-for certainties have become destabilised and contested. Fix Up considers the negotiation of a hybrid identity for Black Britons across several generations, social classes and backgrounds: first-generation Jamaican immigrants Brother Kiyi (owner of Fix Up, a Black consciousness bookshop) and his friend Norma; British-born Black militant Kwesi and Alice, a British-born mixed-race woman. Fragile Land explores how dual heritages are negotiated by young British Asians caught in the conflict between cultural allegiances. Fragile Land centres upon teenage second-generation, British-born Asians whose identity formation is complicated by inter-generational conflicts, but – more significantly – by a sense of being ‘in-between,’ neither British nor Asian.

Introduction

A significant legacy from Britain’s imperial past is its remarkable ethnic diversity, notably in London and in major English cities such as Liverpool, Leeds, Bristol, Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow in Scotland, and Cardiff, the Welsh capital. The post-Empire diaspora brought economic migrants from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by those from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh in the 1970s and the enforced diaspora of Ugandan Asians in 1972.1 ‘Waves of immigration from different parts of the world have helped shape the ethnic mix of the country,’ claimed Len Cook, chief of the Office of National Statistics. Such has been the increase in ethnic diversity that a recent study from the Office of National Statistics revealed that 29 per cent of London’s population is now from an ethnic minority group, and one in fifty marriages involve a husband and wife who are from a different ethnic group.2 The future, one might well argue, is a ‘global masala’

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2 Doughty and Bayley, p.30.
of mixed-race ‘Beige Britons,’ yet whether this is cause for celebration is a hotly contested issue. For some, this heralds the dawn of a post-racial era, of an integrated society where one’s race ceases to matter, an attractive proposal for British government ministers alarmed by Islamophobia following 11 September 2001 and the more recent London bombings of 7 and 21 July 2005. Vikram Dodd reports that 63 per cent of British Muslims had reservations about remaining in the U.K. and feared an anti-Muslim backlash following the 7 July 2005 bombings. However, for others, the ‘global masala’ definition of hybridity ignores the possible loss of the distinctiveness of one’s ethnic heritage and the risk that future generations will no longer know the achievements and histories of their forbearers. Journalist Zenab Short outlines the challenges faced by mixed-race Britons:

The dilemma of mixed-race people is that they do not have an established homeland and have yet to find their place in the world as they play with the boundaries of their parents’ different ethnic backgrounds. [...] The coalescing of mixed-race consciousness goes through three phases. Stage one is having no collective voice: you are preoccupied instead with fitting in with the majority group. Stage two is choosing to identify with the black in yourself: you gain strength from being part of a marginalised group with a strong voice and profile. Stage three: you don’t take a ‘black stance’ or merge with the whites, but celebrate the oneness, the completeness, of being mixed.

Similar concerns also permeate recent productions on the British stage by a new generation of Black British and British Asian playwrights such as Dona Daley, Debbie Tucker Green, Mark Norfolk, Roy L. Williams, Dolly Dhingra, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Tanika Gupta.

This article considers the negotiation of hybrid cultural identities by Black Britons and British Asians in two plays: Fix Up by actor and writer Kwame Kwei-Armah and Fragile Land by British Asian writer Tanika Gupta. Fix Up discusses the search for historical roots and Black identity in an era where these longed-for certainties have become destabilised and contested.

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3 Gary Yonge’s account of the missed-race future in ‘Beige Britain’ also offers a range of perspectives on this phenomenon both in Britain and in the United States: ‘Beige Britain’, The Guardian, 22 May 1997, p.2.
Performing British Identity

Fragile Land explores how dual heritages are negotiated by young British Asians caught in the conflict between cultural allegiances.

Fix Up

Kwame Kwei-Armah is no stranger to the contestation of Black British cultural identities. Born Ian Roberts, he grew up in London’s racially eclectic Southall; at the age of twelve, he was inspired by Alex Haley’s Roots and later changed his name to Kwame Kwei-Armah in homage to his newly-discovered African heritage. Discussing Fix Up, he claimed: ‘Mixed race, or dual heritage, specifically African-Caribbean and white, will be the fastest growing sector of society in the next decade. But no one talks about it. It’ll be the politics of my children’s generation. And it’s a 50 per cent white problem, too, don’t forget!’ In writing Fix Up, Kwei-Armah chose to address the complexities of this

[...] sleeping issue [...] the fastest-growing section of the population is mixed race. And yet the very idea of it encourages prejudice. We talk about people of dual heritage being half of one and half of another – white society sees them as black, and blacks see them as close to white. But in places such as Liverpool, there are people whose families have been mixed race for generations, so they can’t just be half and half.

Fix Up considers the negotiation of a hybrid identity for Black Britons across several generations, social classes and backgrounds: first-generation Jamaican immigrants Brother Kiyi (pronounced ‘key,’ owner of Fix Up, a Black consciousness bookshop) and his friend Norma; British-born Black militant Kwesi and Alice, a British-born mixed-race woman. Central to this play is the belief that the reclamation of one’s racial history is crucial to understanding one’s own identity as a Black Briton: its ‘motto could be

9 Kwame Kwei-Armah, Fix Up (London: Methuen, 2004). Hereafter referred to in the text, preceded by FU. Fix Up was first performed on 16 Dec. 2004 at the National Theatre’s Cottesloe Theatre. The choice of Fix Up attests to the National Theatre’s continuing support of Black British plays, following on its highly successful 2003 production of Kwei-Armah’s Elmina’s Kitchen, which was also made into a film by BBC 4 in 2003; Kwei-Armah acted the role of Deli in the 2005 production of the play at the Garrick Theatre in London’s West End. Fix Up was directed by Angus Jackson and designed by Bunny Christie; the cast was Jeffrey Kissooon (Brother Kiyi), Mo Sesay (Carl), Steve Toussaint (Kwesi), Claire Benedict (Norma) and Nina Sosanya (Alice).
Marcus Garvey’s “A person without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, a 1920s recording of Garvey opens the play, intoning ‘[t]here is no future for a people who deny their past’ (\textit{FU} 3). The role that the past plays for each of these characters is revealing: for Brother Kiyi, knowing your history is self-education in a pan-African heritage, and the first step in building a common vision amongst Black Britons, whether from the West Indies or from Africa. For Black militant Kwesi, one must reject the legacy of colonialism in order to build an exclusively Black future. For Alice, the personal is the political, as she searches for the explanation of ‘why I look the way I do [...] Why I talk and smell different from all around me’ (\textit{FU} 73). In the following, I will offer more detailed analyses of each of these three themes.

The play is set in the Fix Up bookshop in Tottenham. This choice of location is itself telling: Tottenham is an area with a large West Indian population, but in the last twenty years has become increasingly racially diverse, including South Asians, white Britons and more recent immigrants from Eastern Europe in its ethnic mix. Geographically, therefore, the spatial location of the play attests to a growing hybridization. Fix Up’s owner, Brother Kiyi, is a pan-Africanist, devotee of the ‘Back to Africa’ movement leader Marcus Garvey, novelist James Baldwin and Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, whose recordings reverberate within his bookshop, a temple to Black culture and history. Yet, despite his learning and avowed love for educating his community, Brother Kiyi is a man ‘flawed by nostalgia, arrogance and a limited view of what “black” is in a Babylon where mixed race or (the PC term) “dual heritage” is the norm.’\textsuperscript{11} Born Peter Allan, he has changed his name to Brother Kiyi. He sports dreadlocks and African-style Kente cloth shirts; he answers the phone with ‘Tende Mwari’ (‘Hello’ in Kwaswahili). In appearance as well as in outlook, Brother Kiyi is a hybrid of American ‘Black Power’ activist of the 1960s and Jamaican Rastafarian; he believes that the principle problems with his community arise from ‘lack of knowledge of ourselves and our constant desire to imitate, impersonate, and duplicate everything Caucasian, à la Michael Jackson’ (\textit{FU} 36). His remedy is to educate the young in Black history which British schooling has neglected or suppressed: he regards Carl (a young man with learning disabilities) as a surrogate son, and to develop his literacy skills, Brother Kiyi assigns the poem ‘If We Must Die’ by Claude McKay. Brother Kiyi wants Carl to become aware of the contribution of Black people to Britain, citing

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\textsuperscript{10} Sierz, on-line.
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McKay as the ‘father of the Harlem Renaissance, the poet quoted by Winston Churchill to the British soldiers before the Battle of Britain’ (FU 33).

However, in his search for an ‘authentic’ Black identity, there is a curious inauthenticity in Brother Kiyi’s mission: he is West Indian, not African; his theories of Black consciousness are drawn from American models rather than British ones. In short, Brother Kiyi does not engage with the tensions within his own hybrid status as West Indian and British. Brother Kiyi’s dilemma is akin to that cited by many Black British scholars: theoretical bases and models from the United States can be indiscriminately imported and mapped onto the historical legacy of Black Britons; such action ignores one of the key differences between the African American and Black British experience: whilst nearly all African Americans are direct descendants of slaves, such is not necessarily the case with Black Britons, whose origins may be from Africa as well as the West Indies. The dangers of such an approach are poignantly set forth in a key signifier of the play: the volumes of West Indian slave narratives upon which Brother Kiyi has lavished his remaining savings. Initially, he vouches for them as a true, verbatim history:

In 1899 a group of social anthropologists across the entire West Indies – British, French, Spanish, Dutch – interviewed the last remaining beings that were enslaved. Two thousand, three hundred Africans that were between the ages of five and twenty-five when slavery was abolished. Most of them old like ‘somum! But this is bondage, brother [...]. This is the institution that brought us here. (FU 10)

But it later emerges that Brother Kiyi has ‘translated’ African American slave narratives into West Indian dialects in an entirely justifiable (in his view) move to allowing his community to voice their own history:

Brother Kiyi: [...] for years people come in here and ask for their slave stories, their histories and what do I have to give them? Bloody American history. Why should the British, the biggest slavers, get away with it? No!
Alice: So these are not true?
Brother Kiyi: Truth is whatever you choose to believe. Every second of everybody else’s life is recorded. Every facet covered in films or books or something. What about us? Yes, I do care that much. (FU 61-2)

His pan-Africanism is exposed as a romantic fiction which conveniently ignores the conflicts between those of West Indian and of African heritage

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within his own community, and overlooks the complicity of Africans in selling other Africans to British slavers. The name of his bookshop – Fix Up – is apt, for Brother Kiyi is not only attempting to ‘fix up’ his own community by offering them a vision of past heroic struggles against oppression (to serve as the foundation for a brighter future), but he is also trying to ‘fix up’ himself by scripting a yearned-for version of West Indians’ lost history. For all his apparent security of identity, his re-writing of history poignantly outlines the losses and lacunae created by the West Indian diasporas and migrants’ longing to hear the stories and voices of their ancestors.

Brother Kiyi’s unworldliness is countered by Kwesi, a thirty year-old Black militant. Head of the All-Black-African party, he has an upstairs office (courtesy of Brother Kiyi), where he organises Reparations for Slavery marches. For Kwesi, book-learning holds little appeal as a tool for social change:

[... people don’t – want – books. They wanna party, and look good, have the latest hairstyles, and nails and tattoos. That’s where niggers be at, Kiyi. They ain’t spending they money in here. Why should the other man take our money, Kiyi? That’s why we powerless, ’cos we ain’t where the money at. (FU71)]

When Kiyi objects to his shop (which is being repossessed) being turned into an Afro hair salon, Kwesi points out that the Black community can only advance through business acumen and economic stability:

It’s gonna get me into the position that when you want to renew your lease you come to me! Five years from now Afro Sheen gonna buy us a next store and a next store and a next. Before you know it we got all of this place! And that’s when the revolution really starts. (FU71)

Kwesi’s confident belief in capitalist enterprise revolts Brother Kiyi (who is incensed to discover that his in-house militant is the prime mover in the hair salon project), but both men have negotiated their dual heritages as Black and British in a way which speaks of an invested and secure place within their own communities: Kiyi’s bookstore is an informal community centre where he plies his educational mission through lending more books than he sells; Kwesi looks to the regeneration of his community through building a business empire where Black people will no longer have to rent their shops from Whites or Asians.

Within this play, however, hybridization is also characterised by an unhomeliness and dislocation: of forever being ‘in-between’ and also of being rejected by Black Britons. Such is the case for Alice, a mixed-race woman from rural (and largely White) Southwest England. Carl envies Alice:
‘It must be great being you. [...] Yeah, you like must have the best of two worlds, innit? Like you got the black-beauty bit and you got the white-money bit. Hoorah!’ (FU 52). Kwei-Armah himself recalls that a young black boy once said to him, ‘Kwame, I wish I was mixed that’s what all the girls like.’\(^\text{13}\) For Carl, mixed-race means being paler and prettier, having the exoticism of Blackness coupled with the financial security which (for men like Carl) remains sadly elusive. But for Alice, her mixed-race status is a source of confusion, as she explains to Brother Kiyi: ‘I’ve taken six months off work, you know. To – find myself. ‘Cos I’m brown, everybody expects me to somehow know everything black. And I’m like, “Hey, how am I supposed to know what [...] bomboclaat means. I’m from Somerset”’ (FU 36).

Whilst her Somerset neighbours may perceive Alice as Black (and therefore an expert on all aspects of Black culture), the militant Kwesi provokes Alice so he can test where her allegiances lie:

Kwesi: It affects you, you know? Being around too much white folk. I seen the bluest of blackest men get too much exposure, bam, they lose their rhythm. Put on a James Brown tune and they start doing the Charleston to Ras!
Alice (acidic): Isn’t there an ointment you can get to mitigate against that?
Kwesi: What?
Alice: Over-exposure to white folk?!
Kwesi: Ohhhh, somebody’s getting touchy!
Alice: I’m not getting touchy. (FU 43)

Kwesi already knows that Alice is mixed-race, so his first strategy is to insult White people and the nefarious effects of their culture upon Black people. His next step is to test her cultural competence in West Indian slang:

Kwesi: Yes, you are. I say the word white folk and you get all arms!
Alice: Two words, actually. Arms?
Kwesi: Vex! Wanna fight!
Alice: I don’t want to fight you!
Kwesi: Why not? It’s half your people, innit, that I’m cussing, innit! (FU 43)

Alice’s lack of cultural competence confirms Kwesi’s suspicions that she is, indeed, a cultural outsider: ‘Let me come straight, Alice. I don’t trust you. Who are you and what are you doing here?’ (FU 44). For Kwesi, his scorn of mixed-race people borders on stigmatizing them as examples of what overexposure to White people can do.

Yet Alice’s losses cut deeper than Kwesi’s barbed remarks: Alice finds Brother Kiyi’s photo album, and discovers that she is Brother Kiyi’s daughter

\(^\text{13}\) Maddocks, on-line.
by his marriage to a White Englishwoman. When Alice finally confronts her father, she points to the damage he has inflicted by his denial:

I need you to say: Alice, this is you. This is the child I gave away, this is the child I had and then couldn’t be bothered or be arsed to look after, so I dumped into some children’s home to fend for herself, away from anything or anybody that cared, away from anyone that looked or sounded like her, away from all that is kin and natural and safe [...] leave your child to rot, to be raised by the very people you are trying to educate your community against [...]. (FU 73-4)

For Alice, these actions brand Brother Kiyi as a fraud, and she views his rejection of his daughter as not simply as hatred of Whiteness, but of the mixed-race status of his own community:

Was it these? (Pointing to the books.) Are these the reason? Was it too much to have a child like me and do all of that? [...] You’re wrong, ‘cos we are the future. We are where it’s at. You’re borrowing from us and you don’t even know it. See, Bob Marley, mixed race. Alexandre Dumas mixed [...] Most of your so-called black heroes are mixed. All of us are mixed! (FU 74-5)

Alice’s accusations of Kiyi’s denial spark a provoking response. Kiyi’s rebuttal is itself a corrective to the young woman’s view of first-generation immigrants: for those who risked inter-racial marriages in the 1960s and 1970s, hybridity of race was neither accepted nor an enviable social advantage. Rather, such couples were accused of miscegenation, and were subjected to extreme abuse:

What do you know about your mother? You don’t know nothin’! You don’t know what she took to be with me, what shit I took just walking down the street, just fucking being with her. [...] What does your blasted generation know? Do you have people spitting at you in the street? Do you have shit smeared on your windows because you’re with someone that you love? (FU 75)

Such prejudices profoundly affected Brother Kiyi, who ended up killing his wife and was sent to prison. Unable to care for Alice, he had her placed into foster care. In an attempt to explain (but not excuse) his actions, he tells Alice: ‘There was so much pressure. So much hate, do you know what that does to your humanity? It shrinks it. It crushes it’ (FU 80). His encounter with Alice shakes his faith in his carefully-nurtured pan-African identity; following his confession, he cuts off his dreadlocks, a cultural signifier associated with Rastafarianism and Back to Africa movements. What remains is a middle-aged, rather ordinary Black man, howling his loss in an empty shop.
Performing British Identity

Fragile Land

In contrast with Fix Up, Tanika Gupta’s *Fragile Land* initially appears a more light-hearted view of hybridity. Performed at London’s Hampstead Theatre, *Fragile Land* centres upon teenage second-generation, British-born Asians whose identity formation is complicated by inter-generational conflicts, but – more significantly – by a sense of being ‘in-between,’ neither British nor Asian. The play follows the fortunes of four British Asian youths. Two British Asian women (the Hindu Lux and her Muslim friend Tasleema) long for the freedom experienced by their White counterparts: to study, complete their education and go out with boys. In contrast to the women, the two young men reject a Westernized identity: both Omar and his younger sidekick Quasim ally themselves with the militant Islam of Britain’s Muslim Brotherhood. These studies of hybridity as a source of cultural (as well as geographical) dislocation jar with the play’s celebration of ‘multicultural London.’

The spokesperson for ‘multicultural London,’ ironically, is Fidel, the only White character in the play. Fidel embodies the ‘Global masala’ view of hybridity as an uncontested blend of cultural practices, cuisine, fashion, and music from different Eastern and Western cultures. He and his family think of themselves as tolerant, culturally aware global citizens, whereas they are more like cultural tourists: his parents had backpacked around India, are involved in social justice campaigns and have named their son after Fidel Castro. Like his parents, ‘who are always popping in here to buy pakoras, samosas, onion bhajis’ (*FL* 20), Fidel has only a superficial knowledge of Indian culture, but believes that he is a cultural insider. He happily munches Indian ladoo sweets, dates Lux, a Hindu British Asian woman, and dispenses advice to asylum-seeker Hassan on how to contract a marriage of convenience to gain residency in Britain. In stark contrast to the British Asian characters, Fidel seems at home and entirely comfortable in a multicultural world; and his ease is due, in part, to his privileged status as a White, middle-class male who can sample Indian culture, but is not bound by any of its

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14 *Fragile Land* (London: Oberon Books, 2003). Hereafter referred to in the text, preceded by *FL*. The play was first performed in London on 25 Mar. 2003 at the Hampstead Theatre, an off-West End venue. The cast was Tariq Jordan Shami (Quasim), Christopher Simpson (Omar), Medhavi Patel (Tasleema), Paven Virk (Lux), Elyes Gabel (Hassan), Tom Burke (Fidel). It was directed by Paul Miller and designed by Simon Daw.


16 ‘Global masala’ images frequently appear in fashion advertisements, such as the United Colours of Benetton or the current Bollywood-inspired fashions which mix Western jeans with Indian bhindi and sari fabrics, on promotional materials for bhangra and Indo-fusion music, and of course for more upscale Indian restaurants in London such as the Cinnamon Club and Café Ladeez.
familial obligations or cultural practices. At heart, Fidel is an Orientalist,\textsuperscript{17} thrilled at the exoticism of a ‘real live Indian’ girlfriend (FL 20). His view of British Asian women recalls the Orientalist fantasy of a sexually compliant East, as he confidently lectures Lux about the smouldering sexuality of her ‘type’: ‘Asian girls, they’re not exactly the shy retiring types are they ... I mean, they all play-act the innocent but get them on their own and…’ (FL 42). Thus, his smug belief in his own cultural sensitivity is exposed as, at best, patronising and at worst, sexist and racist.

For the young women, inter-generational conflict is the cause of another kind of cultural dislocation which problematises their hybrid identities as British Asians: their fathers want them to behave as if they were back in India, and pay scant attention to their daughters’ protests that such cultural practices prevent their full engagement in British life. Tasleema’s sister Naz had refused an enforced marriage and ran off with her White boyfriend; as a result, Tas’s Abba [Dad] has ‘come down on me heavy. It’s like he’s on a mission or something. Got to prove that he can produce one obedient daughter’ (FL 10). Although he locks her into her bedroom at night, Tas sneak out to meet her friend Hassan; when Abba discovers her insubordination, he plans to send her back to Bangladesh. Although her friend Lux reminds her that such action is illegal, Tas points out: ‘That won’t make no difference to Abba. According to him, until I’m married, I’m his property. [...] Abba’ll just marry me off to get rid of me – then he won’t have any women to worry about’ (FL 69, 25). Intelligent and ambitious, Tas’s take on dual heritage is to choose Britain (which, to her mind, offers greater agency to women) and reject Bangladesh, a country she has never visited and which holds only negative associations of enforced marriages and domestic slavery. However, her goals of completing her education can come only at a very high cost: to become, like her sister, an outcast: ‘On the run? Always looking over me shoulder? Cut off from everyone I know. What kind of life is that?’ (FL 55). Despite the bleakness of this prospect, Tas chooses, at the end of the play, to leave her father and join her sister.

However, the most profound sense of dislocation is found in the young men, who reject what they see as the decadence of the West for the attractions of militant Islam. The recent BBC Two series ‘The New Al

\textsuperscript{17}This now-familiar concept of Edward W. Said’s is explored in his seminal work, Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995). Said argues that the Western Orientalists’ agenda as ‘a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world [...]. Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis á vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes: the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text – All of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient and finally, representing or speaking in its behalf’ (pp. 12, 20; emphases original).
Performing British Identity

Quaeda’ and Channel 4’s ‘Why Bomb London’ interviewed young Muslim men who, although born or raised in Britain, are alienated from what they deem the anti-Islamic culture and values of Britain. Parvati Rahman notes that such young British Muslims have increasingly been viewed with suspicion:

‘Multicultural Britain’ is thus a very contradictory landscape, where there co-exists a love of things Asian, and an intense fear of the Asian ‘other’. Reflecting these attitudes, The Sunday Times columnist Melanie Phillips recently wrote: ‘We have a fifth column in our midst [...]. Thousands of alienated young Muslims, most of them born here but who regard themselves as an army within, are waiting for an opportunity to help destroy the society that sustains them. We are now staring into an abyss, aghast.’

Such a disaffected young man is Omar, although his militant tendencies go no further than wishful thinking and a certain amount of bravado. Omar’s painful negotiations with his hybrid identity as a British Asian are further complicated by geographical displacement and separation from his parents who have ‘fucked off back to Bangladesh and dumped me with a fascist uncle in an alien country which doesn’t want me either’ (FL 30). Where Fidel sees a vibrant multicultural education, Omar paints a grim picture of an inner-city school where ‘half the kids don’t speak English and the other half are so fucked up, they’ve virtually all got social workers’ (FL 63). For him, Britain is riddled with a debilitating racism; when Fidel cheerfully asserts that it’s a ‘free country,’ Omar snaps back ‘[m]aybe for you white boys but it ain’t for us’ (FL 60). He damn his teachers as racists who favour the White boys and ‘think we’re all animals and any sign of strife, they haul the pigs in [...]. As far as they’re concerned, we should all bugger off back to Pakistan, or Bangladesh or wherever the hell we came from’ (FL 63). As a British Asian, he feels failed by Britain; in a telling metaphor, he describes himself as an ‘unwanted piece of baggage full of wonderful possibilities’ which no one will make the effort to open (FL 31). All he foresees is the prospect of dead-end jobs and institutional racism: ‘What? End up working in a factory for peanuts? [...] They’ve all written us off. Who’s gonna give a Paki boy with no qualifications a job in this city? It’s bad enough when you do have letters after your name. We gotta be better than them’ (FL 64).

Bitterly reflecting upon his parents’ disappointments and economic hardship, Omar rejects their view of Britain as the ‘centre of Western civilisation’ (FL 64). For him, the ill treatment of the older generation justifies his generation’s espousal of militant Islam: ‘That’s why we got to

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protect our people man. We’ve had enough of this crap. No more lying down while they kick us around. We’re not like our parents. They never stuck up for themselves. Work, that’s all they know. Working in crap jobs. Never getting promoted’ (FL 63). For this seventeen year-old youth, the Muslim Brotherhood offers him like-minded comrades and a mission of serving Islam through advocating segregation from White Britons. He justifies the policing of women’s sexuality, telling Tas and Lux: ‘You should stick to your own kind – innit. Don’t want no dilution of the race […] You lot fuck about with white boys and we’ll all disappear. Impure blood – don’t want that do we? Lose everything then – our identity, respect, culture’ (FL 15). For Omar, the hybridity of mixed race is tantamount to a crime against Islam crime. In a romanticised assertion of pan-Arab unity, he even goes so far as to claim that British Asians would be better off ‘fighting for Saddam. Least we’d know where we were […] I’d die for the cause. It’s us against them. A holy war’ (FL 34).

If Tas and Omar can confidently choose which side they are on, mixed-race Quasim is stranded between two cultures (neither of which is willing to accept him fully into their communities). He experiences profound self-hatred and feels a fraud. Quasim, in this respect, presents the most disturbing comment upon hybridity as a perpetual estrangement and inability to be accepted for one’s dual heritage. In a marijuana-fuelled hallucination, the ladoos and samosas in an Indian sweet shop denounce him:

First Ladoo: Problem with you Quasim is your half and half innit?
Second Ladoo: Impure blood.
Third Ladoo: Only thing about you that’s Muslim is your name.
Quasim: I’m trying.
First Samosa: Oh, he’s trying.
Second Samosa: You’re a dilution of the original, a pale copy.
Third Samosa: No one really wants you. The English think you look weird and the Muslims think you’re a fake.
Quasim: I ain’t a fake. I’m the new blood. The future belongs to people like me – mixed races, dual identity, double heritage… (FL 49-50)

However, very little in this play backs up Quasim’s assertion; unlike Fix Up, where being lighter-skinned and mixed-race is seen as advantageous, in Fragile Land, Whiteness is castigated as mongrelization. Quasim parrots his friend Omar’s platitudes about Muslim brethren and miscegenation, only to have these cast back into his face:

Tasleema (to Quasim): What are you going on about anyway? Your mum’s English.
Quasim: Yeah, but she converted.
Lux: But that don’t change her skin colour. She’s white, if anyone’s fucking diluted ‘round here, it’s you. (FL 16)
Quasim embraces militant Islam in an effort to prove himself as truly Asian, yet as a mixed-race person, he is consumed by a sense of inadequacy: try as he will, his skin-tone will always give him away; he can never be Asian enough, only a ‘wannabe’ who yearns to belong.

Gupta places two cultural outsiders – multicultural poser Fidel and Afghani asylum-seeker Hassan – to offer contrasting perspectives upon the issue of dual heritage. Hassan has witnessed the execution of his mother, endured beatings and, with his shell-shocked father, escaped from the Taliban to Germany, then to England. As an asylum seeker, Hassan is literally in limbo: he and his father are unable to return to their violent and war-torn country, but remain uncertain whether their application for permanent residency in Britain will be granted. Hassan’s belief that ‘London is a city of opportunity’ (FL 30) stands out in sharp relief to Omar and Quasim’s disenchantment with their birthplace. Unlike Omar and Quasim, who must ring-fence their identity against a (perceived) omnipresent racism, Hassan rejects militant Islam as the solution. He does not share the conflicts and tensions emergent within hybridity precisely because he is secure in his own identity as an Afghani. Unlike the British youths, his hopes and aspirations have not yet been dashed.

**Conclusion**

In *Fix Up*, characters negotiate their identities as Black Britons through specific interventions with the historical past. Brother Kiyi, through the books in Fix Up, seeks to instil an alternative view of British history which affirms the achievements as well as noting the historical injustices done to Black peoples of the pan-African diaspora. To know one’s history thus serves as a means of finally finding one’s place: in Carl’s words, ‘Roots, you know, connection! I use to want to be white till I met Kiyi. Now I’m blue black brother. You couldn’t make me white if you tried!’ (FU 52). For Kwesi, the history of the past is dominated by the colonisation of Black people by White people, and the only way to overcome this is through the sweet revenge of economic success: ‘Can you forgive slavery? Can the European repent for that? [...] The only thing this world understands, Kiyi, power. And until we have that, no matter what we have up there – we’re all joking it’ (FU 26). For Alice, coming to terms with her mixed-race identity incurs disillusionment and acceptance of loss; Alice longs for an inclusiveness, but remains as much an outsider in this Black community as she was at the beginning of her friendship with Brother Kiyi.

In contrast, *Fragile Land* examines hybridity as a divisive phenomenon: one is forced to choose between being British or being Asian, and such
choices necessarily result in rejection from or denial of the other heritage. *Fragile Land* also points to a gender divide, where young women wish to be more Westernised, insofar as this will bring greater personal freedom and educational (and economic) opportunities currently enjoyed by their White peers. For women like Tas or Lux, their parents’ cultures are oppressively patriarchal. However, young Muslim men such as Omar and Quasim are aggressively pro-Asian, seeking refuge in an idealisation of Islam as protection against what they perceive as a hostile and prejudicial Britain.

Finally, hybridity as loss rather than celebration is explored most poignantly through mixed-race characters; *Fix Up*’s Alice and *Fragile Land*’s Quasim point to hybridity as permanent dislocation and disenfranchisement. Journalist Jenny Svanberg speaks of Britain’s mixed-race citizens as ‘a community which is moving out from the shadows and heading purposefully into the light, challenging existing ideologies of ethnic and national purity and staking its claims on this nation.’\(^{20}\) This article, I hope, is a contribution to that continuing journey.

### Bibliography


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Moving Here: <www.movinghere.org.uk>.


Subaltern Envy? Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*

Samir Dayal

Abstract

Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* presents a case study in ressentiment through the eponymous character Moraes Zogoiby, ‘the Moor,’ who experiences his hybridity as a handicap but also regards it as an entitlement. A social outcast and member of an ethnic minority, the mongrel Moor seeks retribution for his own painful alienation by reconstructing himself as a victim while lashing out to victimize others on the questionable grounds of his victimhood. His self-rationalization is couched in the discourse of minority rights, universalism, democratic values – and hybridity. In his contradictory character we are meant to recognize the perplexities of postcolonial India’s contradictions, such as that between universalist socialist secularism and violently exclusivist Hindu nationalism. Rushdie’s novel turns on a driving ethico-political exploration, posing the question of the failure of the postcolonial nation-state’s avowed pluralism and the rise of majoritarian ethnonationalism disguised as tolerant universalism.

Introduction

Kenan Malik cites a scene from Woody Allen’s *Bananas* in which the protagonist, played by Allen, regrets dropping out of college; when someone asks him what he might have been had he stayed in, he replies, ‘I don’t know, I was in the black studies programme. By now I could have been black.’¹ For Malik to cite this admittedly humorous scene as he does in a scholarly journal with a politically informed readership, indexes a certain anxiety about identity politics, an anxiety about the instability of identity. The anxiety in this instance is about the status of ethnic identity: Is ethnicity an elective identification or is it a function of biological ‘race’? Or is it the contrary a matter of social and cultural interpellation of the individual subject and therefore not a matter of choice?² When Walter Benn Michaels writes

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² In Malik’s view the cultural assertion of many ethnic groups including Black youths in Brixton or the Bronx, or Jews elsewhere, is not the cause of racial identification but its product (p.10). Conversely, ‘[r]acial differentiation emerges out of real social and economic mechanisms, out of dialogue and struggle between different social groups, out of the interaction between ideology and social processes. The ruling class can no more “introduce” racial oppression than Afro-Caribbeans can invent their blackness – or Allen become a “black man”’ (p.10). Conceding that it is ‘a fact’ that African-Americans have a lower IQ than white Americans. But what counts is what is made of this ‘fact’ – it could be read as an indication of the paucity of the IQ test when it
that ‘cultural identity can’t be lost,’ he appears to conceptualize identity as having an immutable core: this premise can be characterized as essentialist. Even if we grant that ethnicity is performative (rather than an essence), and that ‘race’ is an increasingly suspect category in both science and civil society, ‘ethnicity’ still has an important role in sanctioned hegemonic practices such as census surveys and college admission deliberations. It has an irreducible social solidity.

Since ethnicity, or race, is the most ‘obvious’ fulcrum for identity politics, we can see why Malik’s concern about identity politics is shared by many in Western liberal democracies. Succinctly formulating the ‘question of cultural minorities’ in such democracies, Partha Chatterjee writes that democratic theory is suspended between the increasingly defensive and ‘intolerant’ majoritarian right-wing groups and the strident claims of ‘inward-looking’ minority identity groups. The crisis of multiculturalism and of ‘cultural minorities’ in the Western democracies also turns on the issue of the universalist language of ‘rights talk’ as it is deployed by the minority identity groups and the majoritarian groups.

Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* takes as its occasion the emergence of an analogous but not identical crisis in the multicultural socius of postcolonial India. The novel presents a family saga whose origins lie in the love between the charismatic and fiery Indian-Christian woman, Aurora da Gama, and Abraham Zogoiby the Cochin Jew who was her family’s employee and who became a spice-trading businessman – and later talcum powder king both admired and feared. Their union produces three daughters and a son they name Moraes, the narrator, whose trademark is a congenital disease that hastens his aging at twice the normal rate. And he also has a clubbed right hand, which becomes not only a mark of his freakish outsider status, but a weapon of communalist violence. Moraes Zogoiby earns the nickname ‘The Moor.’ His narrative is a palimpsested tale of ‘family rifts and premature deaths and thwarted loves and mad passions and weak chests comes to measuring intellectual ability, or in terms of the natural difference between the intellectual abilities of blacks and whites in the U.S. (as in the case of Charles Murray) or that the IQ test accurately reflects the effects of the long oppression of black people.


and power and money and [...] the seductions and mysteries of art’ (14). The narrative layers histories: the account of the expulsion of the Moors from Granada in the same year Columbus sailed the ocean blue, looking for his own spice trade, his own India, is laid on top of the story of the ‘Moor’s’ similar experience of being shut out from society in contemporary India, and the story of the crisis of intolerance in 1492 Spain is a palimpsested metaphor for a contemporary crisis in a formerly tolerant India with the advent of right-wing Hindu majoritarianism. The title has a double reference, to two different and competing paintings, also palimpsested. One is a masterpiece by the narrator’s mother Aurora, the other an inferior exercise by her former protege and lover, and later the Moor’s desperate enemy, Vasco Miranda, who seeks to destroy him.

A social outcast and national minority, the half-Jewish Moor is also estranged from his family, and seeks his retribution for his own painful alienation by reconstructing himself as a victim while lashing out to victimize others on the questionable grounds of his victimhood. His self-rationalization is couched in the discourse of minority rights, universalism, democratic values – and hybridity. When it becomes impossible for him to remain in India, he goes into exile, becoming literally disoriented and ends up in prison under pain of death. In his contradictory character we are meant to recognize the perplexities of postcolonial India’s contradictions, such as that between universalist socialist secularism and violently exclusivist Hindu nationalism. At the heart of Rushdie’s novel is a driving ethico-political exploration. As he rushes irresistibly to his personal, existential confrontation with annihilation, the Moor falls equally rapidly into moral quandaries about the rights and responsibilities of the subaltern, the moral perplexities of victimhood. The novel also poses the question of the failure of the postcolonial nation-state by bemoaning the failure of pluralism and the rise of majoritarian ethnonationalism disguised as tolerant universalism.

The Ethico-Political Imperative

Majoritarian groups insist that the discourse of ‘rights’ must be balanced by an awareness of citizens’ ‘responsibilities’ but in practice they themselves tend to meet this standard only to the extent that their own fundamental interests are not jeopardized. But from the perspective of democratic theory claims to special rights made by members of minoritarian groups may be interrogated as well. A member of any cultural minority has to ask her or himself whether – or on what grounds – she or he qualifies as a claimant to
special rights, whether his or her claims to minority rights proceed from identification with the position of the victim; for victimhood is today increasingly seen even on the left as ethico-politically vulnerable. The debate between essentialists and antiessentialists seems today to have arrived at an impasse, to judge from standoff between critics such as Malik and Michaels on the one hand, and on the other hand commentators such as Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies*, and Diana Fuss in *Essentially Speaking.*

For other observers who fall in neither of these camps, the recent obsessions of identity politics as such have increasingly come to be seen as having ‘led interpretive research in the human and social sciences (not to mention debates in the public domain) to a dead end,’ as Vassilis Lambropoulos puts it. Lambropoulos writes that we need not so much a ‘different approach to identity, be it essentialist or interstitial, but rather a historicist comprehension of its institutional, especially its legal, logic.’

Rushdie’s exploration of the ethico-politics of minority self-representation reflects an attempt to engage ‘the objects and objectives of social identification through which collective and communal agencies become functional and powerful.’ As a writer Rushdie has in several of his works insisted on the one hand on an antiessentialist conception of the subject, and on the other hand on the multiplicity of identity positions (which are not quite fixed identities), including hybrid positions, on which struggles for agency are based. His goal throughout has been to contest models of political fixity and social exclusion. One need look no further than the furore surrounding the publication of *The Satanic Verses* to see that it was precisely his attack on the oppressive monotony inherent in the absolutist ideologies of the One (especially in the case of dominant social or official religious ideologies) that have made him controversial. At the same he has tried in many of his novels (*Midnight’s Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*) to render the pain and even trauma of the minoritarian subject position, of incomplete citizenship, set against the backdrop of the implied failure of the Utopic vision of a pluralist, ‘secular socialist’ democracy in India. That was

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9 Lambropoulos, p.850.

the founding vision of the independent republic’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The 1950 Constitution of Independent India enshrined the promise of democratic secular pluralism. Its preamble promised an India founded on the promise or mantra of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for all citizens of a secular socialist democracy, with its guarantee of self-determination and self-completion for the newly independent Indian subject. The nation-state and the modern citizen subject, needless to say, are themselves model on Western liberal-humanist discourse and transposed to the postcolonial non-Western context. Perhaps that is one source of the ethico-political perplexities of Rushdie’s main character. As the country recently passed the 50th anniversary of its Independence, this milestone has provided an occasion for some soul-searching.

Adding his voice to the critique that the postcolonial state has failed to deliver on this promise, Rushdie here directs our attention to the experience of ethnic minorities in contemporary India. His novel is an allegory for the unfulfilled promise of a postcolonial State. By a synecdochic logic, it is also the story of the moral and political geography of a city: Bombay, which was recently renamed Mumbai. The name is a Marathi word evoking the image of Mumba Devi, deity of the fishing villages that have today become the city, and the name change takes its significance not only from its difference from the Anglicized ‘Bombay’ but from other versions of the name, as pronounced by Hindi-speakers and Tamil-speakers, for instance. ‘The decision to officialize the name “Mumbai,”’ explains Arjun Appadurai, ‘is part of a widespread Indian pattern of replacing names associated with colonial rule with names associated with local, national, and regional heroes. It is an indigenizing toponymic strategy worldwide in scope.’11 In other words, this was ethnonationalist nativism’s rejection of the name ‘Bombay’ as materialized representation of what was not Indian, and more specifically, Hindu. Ethnonationalist activism ‘killed’ that Bombay, in Appadurai’s telling phrase.12 The prime movers of this activism were the Shiv Sena, the ultra right wing of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Under the leadership of Balasaheb Thackeray (lampooned in Rushdie’s book as ‘Mainduck’ – a word that in Hindi means ‘frog’), the Sena were responsible for inciting violence, most particularly the violent destruction, on December 6, 1992, of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya, purportedly the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. The Marathi speaking population was

12 Appadurai, p.643.
their chief constituency in the city and their ethnic ‘cleansing’ of the city targeted Muslims.

Rushdie’s Moor is a motivated representation of the abjected body of the Muslim as outsider. It is a fable of the incompleteness of the minority citizen as hybrid subject whose status as citizen is put into question. This representation would seem to be politically progressive. Yet, while implicitly and provocatively indicting the state for its presumptive dereliction of the duty to its minority citizens, the novel also raises several ethical and political problems without resolving them. More troublingly, it appears to underwrite the Moor’s somewhat questionable self-presentation as victimized hybrid citizen/subject. This fictionalized consideration of the uncomfortable truth about the state of the postcolonial nation-state of India proceeds from an ethical imperative at the heart of democracy: the imperative to be attentive to the (relatively disadvantaged, or minoritized) other in one’s own pursuit of happiness. In the extreme case that other ‘eludes representation’; the phrase is from Robert Baker’s review of Drucilla Cornell’s *The Philosophy of the Limit*, where he writes that ‘Cornell seeks to elucidate the ethical significance of a philosophic practice that would open our thinking toward the multiplicity of singular beings that cannot be represented in any universal discourse, except through a reduction of their singularity.’13 The hybrid, we might say, is precisely that which eludes and elucidates the universal – which would otherwise seem ‘normative’ and ‘transparent,’ unacknowledged or unseen. The ethico-political imperative to engage with hybridity in this sense, it would be no exaggeration to say, has been an animating principle of Rushdie’s oeuvre, under all the pyrotechnics of his prose.

For Rushdie ethico-politics involves responsibility to the other and respect for the principle of pluralism. This ethico-political imperative must be taken seriously as adjunct to what Michel Foucault in another context develops as the imperative of the ‘care of the self.’ But these imperatives only make sense as anchored to identifications (not fixed, essential selves). But what happens when ‘otherness’ collapses into a reification of ‘the other’? More important for this discussion, what happens when one identifies as ‘the other,’ inhabiting that performative or structural position in order to gain some moral or material advantage? Rushdie’s protagonist Moraes Zogoiby, who is clearly middle class, even what is called in India ‘upper middle class,’ comes to re-present himself in the image (*darstellung*, portrait, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would say) of a minority citizen/victim, but also as the

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representative (vertretung, proxy) for the minority citizen/subaltern – this glissement between the two categories of representation goes beyond opposition. It is not only that the two aspects of representation do not comport themselves as a stable opposition, as Spivak has emphasized in noting the ‘complicity of vertreten and darstellen, their identity-in-difference.’ Rather, the slippage from identification with the subaltern to displacement of the subaltern in the case of Moraes is a troubling case of opportunism, as I will argue. And this ethico-political problem returns us to the dialectic of the universal and the particular as constitutive of the agon of democracy that threatens to (and in this novel eventually does) turn into antagonism.

The issue, as I have been suggesting, is at once epistemological and political: it concerns the constitution of the individual as existential entity and the construction of sociopolitical agency. Rushdie is acutely sensitized to the inadequacy and reductiveness of any monological conception of personal, national, or ethnic identity. In his creative as well as his non-fiction work, he has foregrounded ‘hybridity’ reflexively enough to suggest that he would agree with Hobsbawm’s comment that ‘forcing people to take on one, and only one, identity divides them from each other. It therefore isolates [...] minorities.’ It would seem then that Rushdie is wary of essentialism when it appears as a claim to, or an attribution of, a single defining essence for human identity. Such an essentialism would count then as particularism in the bad sense.

From Hobsbawm’s British perspective the Left’s project is universalist in the sense that it is intended to be for all people and does not pander to particularist claims expressed by interest groups or identity groups. Nevertheless, Hobsbawm would insist that the nationalist claim to universalism (that is, a universalism defined within the frame of the nation-state anyway) is ‘bogus.’ Rushdie’s own position is neatly captured by this double vision, even though he does not modulate his positions quite in the way Hobsbawm does. Rejecting, like Hobsbawm, both the bogus universalism of monoculturalist (ethno)nationalism as well as the essentialist account of cultural identity, Rushdie has consistently and explicitly problematized narratological and political fixities in his own life, denying that there are immutables that might anchor personal history.

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17 According to Malik, if such a (postmodern and poststructuralist) hostility to universalism (see
I’m not who I was supposed to be. If you look at where I was born and the family in which I grew up and the kind of life that normally happens to people who grow up in such worlds, I stepped out of that world. [...] I have had the sense of having frequently to reconstruct my life. [...] It gives me the sense of character as [...] mutable [...] Do we change our natures or do we in some essential way remain the same under all the pressures? [...] I’m not sure myself.18

Hybridity, antiessentialism, performativity, and the discursive construction of identity have become commonplaces of contemporary multiculturalist or generally left-leaning and postcolonialist criticism. Rushdie’s work suggests that hybridity and antiessentialism are not to be celebrated with uncritical alacrity. Pious celebration of difference without any real engagement with différence leads multiculturalists only too easily into the quagmire of ‘toleration’ under the sign of universalism that is intolerant of real cultural difference. Such an unexamined celebration of difference facilitates accommodative gestures of ‘protection’ that reinscribe the regime of universal, often Eurocentric, modernity. An uncritical discourse of antiessentialism, performativity, hybridity or a simplistically celebratory discourse of multiculturalism can do little in fact to remedy the attenuation of marginal subjectivity and agency, or even to address the problematic of the postcolonial subject’s incompleteness as citizen and subject in India. And this is most true in the case of the subaltern, as Spivak has argued at length in her Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Even the most sophisticated academic discourses on the ethico-political sometimes risk ineffectuality to the extent that they are produced and consumed entirely within the circuits of the academy. And while Rushdie’s novel does raise such ethico-political issues, it does not always provide answers, as I argue below.

People may choose to belong to particular identity groups, but Orlando Patterson observes that the choice is made with a sense that there really is no

alternative but to belong to those particular groups. If there is no alternative, what do choice, pluralism, transculturalism, and interculturalism, or for that matter hybridity really mean? Rushdie’s novel explores this conundrum as a necessary prolegomenon to imagining a just community or a truly democratic nation-state. The engine of a just society, as John Rawls writes, is a communitarian ethics. Rushdie details in the Moor’s Last Sigh the failure or perversion of a communitarian ethics under the pressure of hegemony or domination and the waning of the category of the individual citizen-subject.

Rushdie’s characters are creatures of the premise that identity is friable: they seem to declare their creator’s endorsement of the idea that the subject is not pregiven but an effect of language. This is what undergirds Rushdie’s grand project of ‘deforming’ – or hybridizing – English itself in accordance to a postcolonial literary strategy. His linguistic confections, as ‘linguisterie’ (to adapt a Lacanian coinage), are examples of the empire ‘writing back.’ This trope of using the master’s tools against the master has become a commonplace of postcolonial critique when it congratulates itself for its subversive energy; yet what drives Rushdie’s verbal inventiveness is not ludic irresponsibility. Rushdie seems to want to emphasize that the subject is an effect of language, that language speaks us. In a previous novel, The Satanic Verses, he has one character say explicitly that when someone else has the power to describe you, that power is also the power to commit epistemological violence – to control your identity, to demonize you. The subject of enunciation is ‘[n]othing but words, words, words’ – this is how, according to a psychoanalytic account, one becomes a subject, as Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen explains: ‘language, the manifestation of the negativity of the subject who posits himself by negating (himself as) the Real, works the miracle of what is not [...]. [The subject] speaks himself in everything by negating everything.’ The power to represent is a creative power in the most radical epistemological (not to mention psychological) sense. Moraes at first seems to experience negativity not as the condition for self-construction, but only as debilitation. This is why the reader has the sense that his story, at the heart of the novel, is nothing if not a story of a desperate search for

something that would stay, or staunch, the exaggerated deconstitution of selfhood. Yet Rushdie’s project is driven more by ethico-political than by epistemological concerns. And if the plot’s urgency is an effect of the story of one man’s attempt to grasp at life as it rushes through his fingers, the significance of the novel is an effect of its preoccupation with the ethico-politics of democracy, situated as it were between universalism and particularism.

Pointedly, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* presents actually existing democracy as an embarrassed and often vitiated shadow of a political ideal. Rushdie describes the actual public experience of Indian society in a multilingual pun as an ‘*insaan* soup’ (350; emphasis added). The phrase can be read as signifying at once the generic or universal brotherhood of all men and the ‘insane’ perpetual war of social interests contrasted with true *Gemeinschaft*. It is the second sense of ‘*insaan*’ – insanity – that is emphasized here, indicating that in Rushdie’s view the whole sphere of the bourgeois citizen in contemporary Indian democracy seems dramatically reduced to a kind of chaos. The individual’s insignificance is doubly marked – not only ontologically but also in terms of communitarian ethics, especially if we consider that we are speaking not only of the attenuation of ‘the individual’ in society, but of the *minority* individual as citizen. But as the plot thickens it becomes clear that Rushdie is not interested only in highlighting that citizen’s alterity and otherness (that would be merely the stock truism of multiculturalism).

The story of Moraes recapitulates the massive divisions of a nation within and against itself – the threatened communalist Balkanization of the postcolonial nation-state. If Rushdie’s interest here is to pose the problem of the betrayal of a founding liberal pluralist principle of national community in India, the solution he offers is limited to the production of a fantasy where an alternative might be imagined to cultural solipsism and to monoculturalism, a fantasy whose Utopian goal is to nudge the Indian national narrative into a more global frame and into a more ethical register, requiring positioning the other as morally prior to the self. This difficult ethical universal is evident in the standard presented in Christ’s passion, for instance, according to which one must place the other first even if it means harm to self-interest. Rushdie’s

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23 Given the overdetermined incompleteness of the individual, a Levinasian frame is especially helpful as a counterpoint for understanding Moor’s orientation to ‘otherness.’ The representation of the Moor as more sinned-against than sinning, a perpetually incomplete subject, is homologous but not identical with what Robert Baker identifies as Emmanuel Levinas’s ‘exaltation of a “passive” subject of ethical “self-abnegation” [...] [hostile] toward the “active” subject of existential “self-assertion”’ (p.13).
protagonists themselves rarely entertain the question of the ethics or the aesthetics of self-abnegation. His fiction, oriented more towards achieving social and political agency or representation than towards the philosophical questions, elaborates a universe marked by a specifically postcolonial experience of the subject’s *becoming*, or aspiration to completeness.

It is this Utopian ethico-political telos that explains why Rushdie presents Moraes, the ‘Moor’ of the novel, as a *stand-in for* the incomplete postcolonial subject in India – a presentation that must be regarded, as I suggest in what follows, as a catachresis. Suffice it to say here that the occasion for this catachrestic identification is the contemporary resurgence of nationalism in India under the regime of the BJP. Appositely, the Moor’s painful cultural liminality throws into relief the rhetoric of ‘Hindutva,’ which gained ascendancy by manufacturing an ideology of the future anterior, where the only legitimate history for the Indian citizen was a history that began with a Hindu past and followed that past’s determined history into the future foretold. This too is a form of universalism that must not be elided by postcolonial studies’ zeal to rehearse the critique of Eurocentric universalism, which flourished during the colonial period and persists today in the era of globalization.\(^24\)

It is important to see that Hindu nationalism emerges, in Rushdie’s representation, at the conjuncture of universalist and particularist impulses. Some but not all of these impulses are mirrored by emergent ethnonationalisms in Europe, Africa, and elsewhere (including Quebec, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). It is important to be attentive to the specific contours of Indian nationalism at the current historical moment, important to observe for instance that the Indian conjuncture is marked by an optimistic new bourgeois capitalism and a heady bourgeois individualism in which the masses do not participate equally.

It is against the paradigm of Western modernity and progress, founded on an appeal to universalism, that we must assess the significance of ‘the Moor’s’ presumptive hybridity: his colonization-and-displacement of the structural place of the minority figure, casting himself as simultaneously ‘portrait and proxy.’ This assay inevitably presents critical ethico-political difficulties. One problem is, How can the exorbitant, the minority, be made

\(^{24}\) Globalization, after all, encompasses neocolonial formations, under the aegis of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other drivers of globalization’s forces. One example will have to suffice here. Consider that in Brazil, for instance, the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest is being accelerated by loans given to developers by the World Bank and the IMF (and other funders who take their loans as an imprimatur of legitimacy). Today, the rainforest is ironically a net polluter of the global environment because the recipients of these loans are land developers who are slashing and burning the forest at the rate of several football fields a minute.
visible as constitutive of the orbit of the culture at the moment of its exclusion as minority – since presumably to be totally excluded is to be made invisible, socially, legally, politically? Another question is, What does it mean to speak about minoritarian political agency – can the subaltern speak in the public sphere or is she or he excluded by definition because the subaltern is defined as that which is outside of (bourgeois) democratic processes and categories? What are the implications of a displacement in which a middle class protagonist like Moraes becomes the bearer of the mark of racial and ethnic minoritization? Is his access to ‘hybridity’ an instance of the appropriation of subalternity? Is it subaltern envy?

Such ethico-political questions are worth asking because they address unspoken but deeply divisive issues of who-speaks-for-whom and who-represents-whom in any program of resistance that cuts athwart ethnic constituencies within any multicultural context. They are also worth pursuing because real political capital can be made from constituting oneself as a member of certain ethnic or socially marked identity groups. The political ‘correctness’ of Rushdie’s insistence on the multiplicity and multi-ethnicity of Indian culture as a counter to the monoculturalism of the ultranationalists, the political correctness of his hybridizing oeuvre’s challenge to the presumptive unitariness and political fixity of Indian nationalism, should not divert the reader from an interrogation of the ethico-political problems posed by his choice of the ‘Moor’ as a wedge against the pieties of unitary nationalism.

To begin to address the ethico-political issues, we must also ask, How does Rushdie’s picture of the reduced sphere of minority agency, particularly in postcolonial Indian society, articulate with what Cornel West, evidently taking up the ethico-political charge, calls the ‘credible options’ for cultural identity positions? West argues that identity ‘has to do with protection, association, and recognition.’ He refers to the individual’s attempt to protect his or her body, labour, and way of life; her interest in associating herself with people who ‘respect’ her; and her wish or need to be recognized as a meaningful part of a community. If West suggests that the meaning of identity is graspable in terms of this tripartite impulse to agency, Rushdie appears to be marking the minority subject’s lack of political agency. But do all lacking citizens have the same ethico-political status? How should we mark the difference among subalterns and other minorities, as well as others.

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who feel that they receive less than is their due?

Identity politics need to be continually re-formulated and reformed by an ethico-politically informed self-reflexive politics that is sensitive to such asymmetry. It is precisely at this point, as we consider the ethico-political relation of the minority subject to the community in the light of Rushdie’s Utopian pluralist convictions, that another question emerges: the problematic of multiculturalism and its sometimes reductive polarizations and thematizations of ‘difference.’ Rushdie’s pluralism is homologous with Charles Spinosa and Hubert Dreyfus’s Heideggerian notion of ‘plural-world antiessentialism’ in which each world – or discursive context – ‘determines the kinds of things, other people, institutions, selves, and so forth that can appear in it.’ At some level, the seemingly intractable animosity between Hindus and Muslims, Jews or Christians in India, or the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, or between Bosnian Serbs and Muslims, is a matter of their incommensurable ‘worlding’ on the basis of key cognitive or epistemological ideas and deeply held beliefs (the ethico-political foundations of their ‘world’) – although ethnicity and religion are not the only registers for such incommensurabilities or antinomies. Spinosa and Dreyfus argue for a Kuhnian ‘weak incommensurability’ of a plurality of conceptual ‘worlds’ in defence of antiessentialist pluralist realities. Rushdie, in his own indirect and Utopian way, offers an analogous defence for pluralism as an alternative to the internecine antagonisms between minority and majority and among minority groups. Although Rushdie seems unable to believe wholeheartedly that such an alternative could actually be achieved, he would say that it is an ideal worth striving for: it is only by envisaging a truly pluralized public sphere that it is possible to speak of an ethico-political discourse in which minority groups can participate, in which minority subject formation can aspire to ‘completion.’ This ambition is evident in one particular sense in which ‘hybridity’ is central to the novel, namely the proliferation of ethnic identifications – Jews, Christians, Muslims and other minorities – the ‘Moor’ of the novel greedily assimilates into his ego.

By marked contrast, as authorial ego Rushdie speaks from the distanced perspective of a diasporic eye. From that remove, it may be easier to recognize that in India the promise of a multicultural polity is often frustrated by a systemic ethico-political blindness. The struggles of Christians,

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28 Spinosa and Dreyfus, pp.749, 761.
Muslims, and Jews are not recognized as being cognate with the struggles of women, gays, the poor and the handicapped; and there is a forgetting of the structural similarity between the erstwhile hegemony of the colonizer over the colonized and the current hegemony of Hindu groups in present-day India over other groups, not to mention a blindness to the structural analogy between casteism and modern class war. Fundamentally what Rushdie is pointing to is a sanctioned intolerance of real incommensurability in India under the aegis of an official rhetoric of secular pluralism. Of course this specific intolerance of real ‘difference’ also appears in various sanctioned guises everywhere in multicultural contexts, masquerading under the cloak of the rhetoric of universalism. Spinosa and Dreyfus say, if somewhat quaintly, that while ‘we might [...] recognize another world as so nasty that cross-dwelling, for us, would seem repulsive. [...] A plural-world antiessentialist might [...] misjudge a nice world as nasty, but will not be motivated, as the essentialist is, to see the very existence of the nasty world as a threat to her own.’29 The true test of tolerance would entail not only being open to the other when the ways of the other may repel us or require us to sacrifice our own interest to some degree. It would also entail a conscious acknowledgement that the ways of the other may not even yield to our understanding. Only such a model of tolerance can be an effective long term alternative to the conflicts that regularly emerge between and among adherents of different religions and unequal economic power, adherents in whom differences are embodied in essentialist encodings of blood and soil, place, and race. This is a major reason for Rushdie’s rejection of essentialism. For essentialism is often intolerance: another stick with which to beat the already disenfranchised and disempowered.

Rushdie places in his character Vasco’s mouth what could easily be the shibboleth of the Hindu theocrats: ‘We are not a nation of “averages” but a magic nation – a magic race’ (174). From the perspective of the Jew, Christian, or Muslim, this intolerant universalizing essentialism is only too familiar, linked in a cruel paradox to the gesture of ‘toleration’ or ‘protection’ of minorities. As presumptively non-Indian, these and other minorities are to be tolerated so long as no attempt is made to interrupt the idyll of Hindutva, of Hindu-ness, and so long as they are willing to be redeemed by inclusion and preferably even conversion. This is of course only covert intolerance, and it is Rushdie’s conscious target here, in his description of the annexation of minorities by the Hindu majority, through the latter’s strategic ascription of a hypostatized minority identity to the

29 Spinosa and Dreyfus, p.61.
former, and by its equally strategic ethnicization of identity. Majoritarian identity is constructed as a complete – fulfilled and totalized – essence, at the same time as it is generically or universally ‘Indian’ while minoritarian identity is coercively constructed as incomplete, as an inferior political position. In its most sophisticated version, majoritarian particularism wants to pass as a positionless position if not as universalized essence, so that its ideology appears as a wholly transparent national doxa, its currency consisting of indefatigably interchangeable signs: India is Hindu, and ‘Hindu’ is synonymous with ‘Indian,’ and always within a manufactured and universalizing mythology. This familiar catechism has its echoes elsewhere in the world and is not just the product of Eurocentrism.

In an elective disidentification with the Hindu majority, presumably, Moraes assimilates his Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ethnic antecedents as though these were arranged in a synchronic identificatory space, each figured in part as a sub-version of Hindutva. He also slips conveniently into and out of positions marked, but also trivialized, as ‘minority’ in Indian society. Is there not perhaps a too-easy assimilation and homogenization of all these minority positions into a hybrid self-image? Do not these labile identifications with minority positions constitute ‘a reduction of alterity,’ in Baker’s phrase, of the sort that is ‘at work in discursive universalization’ – presumably something Rushdie himself would want to avoid, were he fully aware of the implications of his method? It is in not fully recognizing and thematizing this slippage that Rushdie’s project of investigating the ethicopolitics of ethnic identities falls short of what Lambropoulos calls a ‘nomoscopic’ analysis – which is to say a thoroughgoing analysis of the ethical underpinnings of governance and of the interpellation of identities within structures of governance. Hybridity must pass this nomoscopic test. The difficulty, however, remains that within the pages of the novel there does not emerge a fully-fledged ‘nomoscopic’ evaluation of his representation of the Moor’s predicament. Or perhaps it is unfair to expect a novel to perform such a meta-analysis of the issues its narrative raises about its characters? By the same token, it is incumbent upon the reader to raise these issues.

The novel invites us to read a pun into the title, as a hermeneutical clue, for it is about nothing so much as the ‘Moor’s’ unmooring from the national community of Hindu India as a hybrid mongrel, and perhaps most poignantly his unmooring from the secure harbour of the family. Puns of this nature are an irreducible thread woven into the text. The novel depends on fortuitous puns and crazy image and word plays, some of which, like Zeenat Vakil’s

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30 Lambropoulos, p.876.

Another such play is the repeating images of the canvases painted by Aurora and Vasco Miranda. Vasco for instance recapitulates on his canvases all his pain, sometimes covering painful scenes over with other scenes. And Aurora ‘immortalised [the] painful scene’ of the two figures in a boat, one of whom was Aires in a wedding dress and the other his sailor lover, with the third figure left ‘alone in her nuptial bed’ (203) – a traumatic scene if ever there was one, and it too is repeated by one of Aurora’s pupils, the Accountant (202-3). She returns to her pet themes ‘obsessively’ (202); she cannot recognize fully the traumatic truth of the way in which she had cast out her only son, until she returns in her own canvas entitled The Moor’s Last Sigh (echoing Vasco’s canvas) to ‘the one subject she had never directly addressed’ by ‘facing up’ to the symbolic meaning of ‘that stark description of the moment of Boabdil’s expulsion from Granada’ (218). It was on account of a misunderstanding perpetrated by the scheming Uma about the Moor’s purported Oedipal desire for his mother that he was thrown out from the family’s bosom (252). The trauma of dispossession binds mother to son as nothing else does in the book. In the Moor pictures was the fantastic fulfilment of a hybrid, pluralized Utopia of possibilities that was never available in the real India: ‘Call it Mooristan [...]. One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumpo’ing into another, or being under, or on top of it. Call it Palimpstine. And above it all, in the palace, you’ (226). Her vision repeated itself in a ‘polemical’ series representing an attempt to realize something she feels has been dispossessed of, an attempt ‘to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation; she was using Arab Spain to re-imagine India’ (227). In her vision Rushdie compresses the impossible dream of a golden age’ in which the minorities – ‘Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains’ (227) – could be interwoven into an unimagined text, a national narrative. Vasco Miranda would attempt a similar Utopia in Benengeli: ‘How many years I had to hear you people spouting-shouting rubbish about unity in diversity [...]’. But now I, Vasco [...] have created that new society’ (412). We wonder if it is not Rushdie himself who is constructing the Utopic image when he invests in his narrator a theorization of a collective consciousness uniting all of us: ‘they say we should not humanise the inhuman. But the point is that they are not inhuman, these Mainduck-style Hitlers, and it is in their humanity that we must locate our collective guilt, humanity’s guilt for human beings’ misdeeds; for if they are just monsters [...] then the rest of us are excused’ (297).
Similarly, he insists on the ‘insaanity’ of the perfidious Uma, punning on the word for human being in Hindi, insaan (322) – and Bombay itself as an ‘insaan-soup’ (350). Rushdie reminds readers that despite the country’s multicultural medley, multiculturalism in India at least is tied to communalist tension, although if inter-communal harmony is ever going to be possible, there is no better proving ground in the country than Bombay, the city in which Rushdie has often set his Manichaean struggles between opposing forces – whether Shiva versus Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* or Mainduck versus Mogambo in this novel. Another overdetermined and traumatic pun turns on the word ‘Moor’ itself, which is almost synonymous here with expatriation and exile (see 390). It not only links the protagonist’s trauma by functioning as ‘repetition’ of the name of Boabdil in another space-time, but also connects him to the Indian national bird, the mor or peacock, emblem of beauty and pride and thus ironically an index – a cruelly repetitive confirmation – of the Moor’s ethnically and physically minority status:

I may say without false modesty that, for all my South Indian dark skin (so unattractive to society matchmakers!), and with the exception of my crippled hand, I did indeed grow up good-looking; but for a long time that right hand made me unable to see anything but ugliness in myself. And to blossom into a handsome young man when in reality I was still a child was [...] a double curse [...]. My inside and outside have always been out of sync. (162)

It is this being out of sync that captures his traumatic inability to feel complete, at home in himself, in the fold of his family, and for that matter in any country.

However, the novel does not explore merely a personal unmooring. Its central problematic is the ethico-political theme of alienation that captures in the small the fragmentation and fractionating of various ethnic groups from one another, and the resulting sociopolitical and psychical incompleteness of the minority citizen in India. As Rushdie presents it, the Moor’s alienation and marginalization are vectors not so much of a bourgeois individual tragedy as of a systemic failure of the socialist secular society. His restless shuttling between social positionalities or cultural sites is an expression of a frustrated search for belonging, the distress of a minority subject’s incomplete access to political processes and institutions. The antidote to this distress would be precisely an ethical commitment to social justice and the renunciation of stereotypes of ethnopolitical identity and a new ‘raciology,’ in Paul Gilroy’s sense of placing race and ethnicity at the conceptual heart of
any program or analysis of social transformation.31

Unbecoming Indians, or, The Negative Potential of Hybridity

To recapitulate, the ethico-political issues raised by the novel have to do with the Moor’s access to ethnic identifications. His presumptive otherness appears to be founded on the premise that modalities of ethnic identification, and consequently a given individual’s relation to ‘the nation’ (the legitimacy of one’s claim to ‘Indianness’ as it were) are labile, and that identity itself, if defined in terms of nationality, is fungible. Hobsbawm succinctly endorses this view in a homely image: ‘most collective identities are like shirts rather than skin, namely they are, in theory at least, optional, not inescapable.’32 Moraes’s multiple and shifting ethnic identifications are a performative dressed up as ‘hybridity.’ I say ‘dressed up’ because in truth he never quite apprehends the promise of hybrid performativity, of relinquishing fixed identity positions, even though this promise stares him in the face, and provides what little optimism there is in the novel. One can only attribute this to Moraes’s (willful?) blindness. For his words speak more wisely than he knows. He avers that he has no essential identity, no ethnic anchor for his self: ‘I [...] was raised neither as Catholic nor as Jew. I was both, and nothing: a jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. I was – what’s the word these days? – atomised. Yessir: a real Bombay mix’ (104; emphasis original). His words point towards, without approximating, an emancipatory self-fashioning as a hybrid diasporic, and towards an ethico-political struggle beyond nation and ‘ethnie.’ Had he fully recognized the negative potential of his postcolonial interpellation the Moor might have clear-headedly embraced his incompleteness, his unbelonging as a citizen of nowhere – and thus embraced the negative power of hybridity. Even if this negativity is not freedom, it does invoke the potentiality of ‘un-becoming’ Indian as alternative to seeking meaning solely in territorialized ‘belonging.’ It is this unthinkable inhabitation of only an ‘imaginary homeland,’ this incompleteness, that for Rushdie himself defines the very condition of a transvalued diaspora. Strangely, Rushdie does not empower his protagonist with the sophistication to apprehend the negative potential of hybridity.

What does it mean to abjure citizenship perpetually and consciously in favour of diaspora and incompleteness, to be minoritized everywhere under the sign of this self-dispossession, this obliteration of ego by hybridizing it? On the other hand, what are the implications of a voluntaristic constitution of the self marked as ethnic? It is ‘dangerous and absurd,’ objects Hobsbawm, for David Selbourne to call upon ‘The Jew in England’ to ‘cease to be English’ and to own up to a real, ‘Jewish’ identity. Rushdie would agree with Hobsbawm that choosing multiple identity positions seriatim or simultaneously is not necessarily a problem but a useful contribution of identity politics to contemporary notions of community, that technically indeed one is entitled to multiple identity positions or performatives, like so many ‘shirts.’ On this account the Moor would seem to have some latitude to choose to align himself with various places and identity groups – he can choose to identify himself as young or old, Jewish, Christian, or descendant of Arab Muslims. He can choose to go away to Benengeli, as he does at the end of the novel – having secreted away the very middle class insurance of a valid Spanish passport and an airline ticket, at the instruction of his mother. This is an insurance policy against the inevitable crisis of multiculturalism, against the inevitable outcome of adhering to a dominant monoculturalist ideology.

As it turns out, in neither India nor Benengeli does he achieve the luxury of living the kind of life a member of the majority group lives – a life that does not require checking constantly to see whether one enjoys a full citizenship. Ironically, the prospect of finding a true home in or outside India is rendered impossible; yet while Rushdie himself might see in nomadism and ‘homelessness’ a kind of cosmopolitan freedom, Moraes’s limitation is that he cannot free himself from the homing instinct. Moraes is in that sense a diasporic Indian in India who is unable to embrace what (negative) pleasures may be found in cosmopolitan homelessness; he cannot escape being a subject of governance in the Foucauldian sense. While he is able to, compelled to, move from one identity to another, he embodies the blockage of any mechanisms of palimpsestic transculturation, of hybridity. By contrast, as I have argued, Rushdie himself pointedly dissents from the easy celebrations of hybridity and mestizaje fashionable in cultural critique. He is alert to the handicaps of hybridity conceived in that straightforward sense.

To return to the problematic introduced at the opening of this article,

Malik suggests that if we could simply choose among identity positions, ‘racism would not be a problem.’ He argues that ‘the problem’ with multicultural discourse arises when all identities or identifications are thought to be ‘of equal social validity’ so that elective (ethnic) affinities such as affinities with ethnic musical styles are raised to the same level as ‘social products’ such as race and class, while at the same time determinate social relations between identity and society are denied. Of course the point is that he believes that one cannot ‘perform ethnicity,’ cannot in fact extricate oneself from the condition of being say black in Europe or the U.S., and that is one reason that racism remains a problem for black people: since there is no question of choosing, ethnicity (or ‘race’) is a kind of bad luck for minorities, and good luck for majority groups. Malik would find it fitting that Moraes’s very name, Zogoiby, means ‘the unlucky.’

One can choose to belong to an exclusive ethnic or religious faction and on that basis demonize or minoritize another, elevating the core belief into a sacred ‘Thing.’ This is the source of communalist fury:

there is a thing that bursts out of us at times, a thing that lives in us, eating our food, breathing our air, looking out through our eyes, and when it comes out to play nobody is immune; possessed, we turn murderously upon one another, thing-darkness in our eyes and real weapons in our hands, neighbour against thing-ridden neighbour, thing-driven cousin against cousin, brother-thing against brother-thing, thing-child against thing-child. (36)

34 Malik, p.9.
35 Malik, p.9.
36 In the novel, the British have to step in to quell the fighting between the two halves of his family. What is the significance of this intervention, if any? It would seem to confirm an old stereotype, that the natives really were incapable of self-governance. One can only conclude that Rushdie is revisiting this stereotype to rehearse a critical concern of postcolonial criticism: to pose a challenge against the stereotype. The theme of internecine tension is articulated at the national level as well as the familial, to suggest that there is something ineluctable about factionalism in all human relations between groups; it is not just a matter of ethics and politics. Epifania came from ‘an old, but now much-reduced trader family, the Menezes clan of Mangalore, and there was great jealousy’ when she snared the rich Francisco – ‘against all reason, in the opinion of many disappointed mothers, because a man so rich ought to have been decently revolted by the empty bank accounts, costume jewellery and cheap tailoring of the little gold-digger’s down-and-out clan’ (15). Thus at the beginning of the family story presented in this novel is the theme of difference, of hybridity in the ordinary sense of the word, among even the most homogeneously constituted people, whether at the level of the family or at the level of the nation. When Belle (Isabella Ximena da Gama, Aurora’s mother) married Camoens da Gama, she mocked Epifania for her humbler background (11).

It must be said also that there are other problems raised by the passage quoted. Does the image of a vicious ‘thing’ as the secret of human nature lend itself to a rationalization of the violence that erupts between any two groups, does it weaken the Utopian hope of more or less
That Rushdie’s protagonist, by contrast, chooses hybridity and pluralism
would appear to constitute a progressive rejection of monocultural,
exclusivist identity politics, were it not for the fact that he seeks to profit
from his embrace of hybridity, from his exploitation of the rhetoric of
subalternity.

In this novel, as in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie seems to posit the idea
that the nation can be envisaged as a community in which neighbours build
good fences with their neighbours – to preserve, respect, even celebrate real
difference in the strict sense of ‘toleration.’ He evidently wants to resist the
exclusion of minorities for ‘wearing the wrong sort of head-dress, speaking
the wrong language, dancing the wrong dances, worshipping the wrong
gods’ (414). Accordingly, he confers upon his character Moraes an ambition
to hybridize and thus shake Indianness loose from the grip of the
fundamentalists of nationalism, for ‘[n]ot even an Indian was safe in Indian
country; not if he was the wrong sort of Indian, anyway’ (414). Moraes takes
the moral high road in presenting himself as the one to whom it is given to
imagine a possible utopian future in which justice and liberty can truly
become actual for all members of the national family.

His story is offered at one level as the story of a man in search of love:
motherly love, fatherly love, romantic love and in the broadest terms
brotherly love. ‘The Moor’ expresses his ambivalent longing for what he
calls, again employing a sardonic pun, ‘Indian country,’ as though he were
speaking not only about the subcontinent but about all those dispossessed,
decolonized, and displaced people who could literally and metaphorically
come under the sign of *Indians*: ‘I had been in Indian country all my life,
learning to *read its signs*, to follow its trails, rejoicing in its immensity [...]struggling for territory [...] pushing out its frontiers, making my way through
its dangers, hoping to find friends, fearing its cruelty, longing for its love’
(414; emphasis added). Yet, interestingly, it is not easy either to condemn
or to sympathize with Moraes.

Given that he is avowedly motivated by these brave ambitions it seems
even more piquant that Moraes’s blithe identifications with a rainbow of

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harmonious social life? The Moor himself raises such a question not only about his own family
but also generically about the Indian family, the Indian nation, as well as about humanity: ‘What
sort of family is this? Is this normal? Is this what we are all like?’ His conclusion is, ‘We are like
this; not always, but potentially. This, too, is what we are’ (40).

37 On this point, I have profited from reading J. M. Coetzee’s review of the novel, ‘Palimpsest
marginalized groups threatens to occlude the specificity of real subaltern oppression or to homogenize subalternity itself by equalizing all minorities in the name of promoting hybridity. To the extent that it is satisfied to represent victimhood in sentimentalized terms, Moraes’s instinct for self-presentation as a figure emblematic of ethnic ‘victimhood’ at the hands of the extremists underestimates the influence of communalist fundamentalism about national identity and the barbarism of Volksch nationalism.

Rushdie seems conscious of some of the dangers traced above, precisely because he does seem to have an interest in imagining a just civil society. And he is too much a writer of political conscience, of what Paolo Freire would term ‘conscientization’ not to recognize that the story he tells raises the ethico-political problem of moral equivalence: that is, the question whether someone who feels betrayed by his or her country and family to the point of de-moralization may be excused for feeling that he or she does not bear the same responsibility to nation, community, or family – while enjoying the benefits of living in the country. What are the responsibilities of hybridity? What is the price of belonging? If it is a principle of democratic civic life that someone who has been cut out of meaningful and real civic participation in a given society should be permitted to opt out of it, then this means that positive ethical norms and ethical responsibilities – which are culturally defined with the possible exception of some universal ethical laws – may not apply universally and uniformly to such demoralized or abjected subjects. In short, de-moralized subjects may feel they are beyond the pale of conventional morality. Obviously, I am talking about a kind of moral extremity, a limit case, but it is precisely limit cases that demarcate the boundaries of cultural and ethical norms, the more so in the global era when cultural borders are often taken to be increasingly porous or relativized and when universalisms of all kinds are under scrutiny.

By documenting individual as well as social fragmentation and incompleteness in postcolonial Indian society, Rushdie presents a fundamental contrast between (a) the politically reprehensible idea of a nation as a closed monocultural society governed by a majority group (not necessarily in the numerical majority) who take their picture of the world to be universally true and good and (b) the ethically superior alternative of (secular) liberal pluralism, but one which does not necessarily resolve itself in a common culture. The novel is in some ways (to use the Moor’s own

Subaltern Envy?

(279) words) a lament about the ‘defeat for the pluralist philosophy on which we had all been raised’ (272). For some, pluralism of the kind Rushdie invokes appears to threaten what binds people across various social, economic, national or ethnic divides. Urvashi Butalia criticizes Achin Vanaik’s recommendation that ‘what we need to be thinking of is a sort of radical pluralism – many categories, a juxtaposition of agencies working for radical transformation. And with the working classes no longer the hub.’ Even in activist circles, Butalia observes, ‘the danger is of connections disappearing.’ The failure (or refusal) to recognize the other actively and sympathetically is a danger Rushdie acknowledges. He takes rather a middle position between Vanaik’s and Butalia’s, construing pluralism as an ethical and political imperative against a short-sighted ‘universalism.’

Pluralism as Rushdie conceives it is not a political threat to ethical universalism. It is different from the epistemological universalism and invoked by extreme monoculturalists, like Mainduck in the novel, who sees the Hindu caste system and the Hindu nation in essentialist and absolutist terms. For there is a kind of national ‘universalism’ that refuses to acknowledge any analogy between the oppression of Muslims and Jews and the oppression of women, and refuses to see a structural homology between the hegemony of Hindu groups in present-day India (or of the colonizer over the colonized in a past which casts its shadow over the present) and the hegemony of the rich over the poor, of men over women, of higher over lower caste and class. The common struggles as well as the specific differences get erased under the flattening ‘universalism’ that promotes the interests and ideals of the majority. True pluralism notices such differences, and refuses to assimilate them into a homogenized, universalized figure of ‘the disadvantaged’ or ‘the oppressed.’

Many thinkers concerned about the risks of pluralism imply or say that, in principle, universalism is necessary either as an enabling condition of any rational inquiry or as a safeguard against exceptionalism (or particularism) and against the anarchy of competing and incompatible visions of national life under the banner of pluralism. Malik allows that poststructuralist or postmodernist theories ‘have no affinity with nineteenth-century racial science’ and that those theories take as their starting point an ‘opposition to naturalistic theories of race.’ But, he goes on to observe, ‘in its hostility to universalism and in its embrace of the particular and the relative, poststructuralism embodies the same romantic notions of human difference


as are contained in racial theory.\textsuperscript{41} Without a universalist theory, argues Malik, all social and political facts and claims become equally important and relativized. But this worry ignores considerations such as \textit{purpose} or \textit{interest}, which are actually constitutive of what an interpretive community regards as ‘fact’ or valid claim. Malik cannot tolerate a more anarchic ethics, where there is no reigning social truth, no self-validating or apodictic claim, but where there can nevertheless be ad hoc alignments of purpose and unpredictable collocations of interests guiding interpretation and regulating claims made on the state and society.

Malik would seem less receptive to the promise of multiplicity implied by Walter Benjamin’s notion of heterogeneous temporalities than would Rushdie, because the latter he appears to recognize that the risk of social fragmentation implied by heterogeneous temporalities and incommensurable subjectivities or multiple, coexisting world-views is offset by a reduced risk that any one majority group will establish a tyrannical stranglehold on society. While someone like Malik might find the proliferation of particularisms potentially anarchic there is no transcendent rule that a universalism is necessary to ensure civil society. Neither is a totalizing history necessary: ‘history may be made up of the multiple meanings of specific, particular histories – without their necessarily being in turn part of a larger meaning of an underlying Idea or force.’\textsuperscript{42} And here, for Malik, is the rub. A society that tolerates incommensurability between and among social groups or world-views would be intolerable to him, as would an antithesis between any two cultural or historical horizons that is not recuperated in a higher synthesis: ‘how would one be able to distinguish between a racist history and a non-racist one? Each would be valid in its own context.’\textsuperscript{43} Malik says that a racist and a non-racist interpretation of history are not equally valid, and nor are a Jacobin and an aristocratic interpretation of the French Revolution. But he then goes on to say that ‘we are required to choose between them’ and that ‘a totalizing theory gives us the capacity to make such choices.’\textsuperscript{44} This is where Malik’s critique falls short – in the sense that he does not go far enough because he stops at a merely theoretical and idealist point, and because he asks and answers the wrong question. The question is not simply whether it is morally right to hew to a non-racist rather than a racist understanding of human society, but what it is about human

\textsuperscript{41} Malik, p.4.
\textsuperscript{42} Robert J. C. Young, \textit{White Mythologies: Writing History and the West} (London: Routledge, 1990), p.22.
\textsuperscript{43} Malik, pp.12-13.
\textsuperscript{44} Malik, p.13.
societies across time and space that raise the question of morality. (For most purposes and most interests, we can perhaps expect that it will be recognized that it would be good if people could behave in the morally right way.) In other words, it is only possible to raise to the level of discussion the requirement to make the distinction between racist and non-racist theories because in fact in the real world this becomes a matter of realpolitik. The problem of racism is not to be addressed simply by an ex cathedra pronouncement of the importance of universalism’s validity or of a totalized history’s authority. Racism can meaningfully be addressed only in terms of what is the form of racism in question, and what can be done about it. For instance in the case of affirmative action, it is not a moot question whether a racist America is better or worse than a non-racist America; the really meaningful issues have to do with whether affirmative action as we know it is the right approach, whether ‘reverse discrimination’ is a valid complaint, and whether there are better ways of measuring and correcting inequities. The true alternative to pluralism, something Malik underemphasizes, is monoculturalism, not a rudderless and unethical relativism.

Ethnicity and Ethics

The novel articulates a fundamental challenge for the ethical project of a democratic postcolonial society in India: the interminable renegotiation of the rhetoric of inclusion employed by the majority, which has too often proved to be deceptive, stacked against minorities. Exclusivist, monoculturalist ethnonationalism has thrived in contemporary India, and this is what provides the drama in Rushdie’s novel. Symptomatic of this ethnonationalism is the majority Hindu right wing’s singularist public rhetoric, embodied in Mainduck’s ostentatious ‘tolerance’ of minorities, particularly his magnanimous tolerance of Aurora’s art. When Mainduck’s men ‘include’ minority artists such as Aurora, it is a public relations effort, to show ‘what-what we do for minorities’ for it only strengthens the cause to be seen as having a ‘big tent,’ ideologically speaking (260). This is a self-consolidating stratagem to domesticate, neutralize, the minority; and for Mainduck it is also a salve for his thwarted erotic fixation on Aurora. As Mainduck puts it, ‘In India every community must have its place. [...] This too is part of ideology of Ram Rajya, rule of Lord Ram’ (260). Aurora, as her name suggests, is wakeful, alert, sceptical of this ‘ideology.’ Annually on Ganesh Chaturthi, a Hindu festival honouring the elephant-headed god, she
dances her objection to the celebrations which had been appropriated by the Mumbai Axis, a right wing Hindu fundamentalist group (124). The Axis’s ‘Beautification Programme’ involves the ‘elimination of the poor from the city’s streets’ (125); here, ‘elimination’ takes on ominous overtones. Aurora refuses to be conscripted by Mainduck and resists the paternalistic inclusiveness or ‘protection’ of the ‘fist-clenched, saffron-headbanded young thugs’ mobilized by Raman Fielding and his allies in the cause of ‘Hindu-fundamentalist triumphalism’ (124). And there is only so much resistance to the majority ideology that will be tolerated. Tolerance, masked and coded as the backhanded gesture of protection, is of course the mask of a hegemonic strategy of contemporary politically correct majorities. But this tolerance is of course the mask of the hegemonic strategy of contemporary politically correct majorities, as Ien Ang notes:

in the ideology of tolerance the dominant majority is structurally placed in the position of power inasmuch as it is granted [or arrogates to itself, one might say] the active power to tolerate, while minorities can only be at the receiving end of tolerance; or, if they are for some reason (e.g. having the ‘wrong’ religion) considered beyond the realm of the tolerable, deemed unworthy of being tolerated.

Ang’s final tautological truism, where a soi-disant tolerant majority rationalizes its intolerance, is not only an element of the history of the Indian subcontinent, but a constant state in the changeable contemporary reality of India: Muslim separatism in Jammu and Kashmir, the fighting over the Ayodhya mosque, the protests against the ‘scheduled caste’ allowances for admission to educational institutions and jobs, and so many other instances. It is an obsession with this reality that undergirds Rushdie’s sometimes surreal fictions, a feature which so often is inadequately developed in many accounts of his work. Aurora’s repeated resistance to being appropriated in the general celebrations for Ganesh Chaturthi (124) results in the retraction of the masquerade of tolerance and substituted by direct persecution. Once the ideological gloves are off, Aurora is accused of being an outsider, and Westernized, inimical to the (Hindu) nation.

Yet the rhetoric used to oppress the ethnic minorities is not always that subtle. In the India immediately following Independence, one of the important issues popularized by the majority groups was the collaboration of ethnic minorities with the former British rulers. Appositely, Vasco mocks the

46 Ang, p.40.
minorities he describes as ‘Macaulay’s Minutemen’ many of whom would become in fact part of the postcolonial elite who took over from the British, but some of whom, in spite of their complicity, became targets of the Hindu nativism of the new nation (as a result of the territorialisation of echt Indian identity). Aurora is almost alone in being contrasted with those who collaborated – whether with the colonizer or the majority groups that in a way replaced them, a moneyed elite sometimes identical with the former comprador class. But the novel develops the irony that those who were in a position to benefit from collaboration under British rule and chose not to do so were destined to pay an even greater price in postcolonial India than those who did collaborate. The character Francisco, for instance, was initially an enthusiast of architecture, a modernist and an anti-colonialist. In 1916 Francisco joined the Home Rule campaign led by Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak; he invited lumpen groups to his house (dock-workers, tea-pickers, coolies, and his own employees) to join forces with the ‘local bourgeoisie’ in a regional Home Rule League in Cochin, causing his wife to exclaim with injured class pride, ‘Masses and classes in same club! Shame and scandal!’ (19). His wife Epifania disapproves of his philanthropy: ‘can we eat of your thisthing, your anthropology?’ (17; emphasis original). Francisco rose to national hero status when he was jailed, but this credentializing event simultaneously ‘undid’ him (19). His decline from ‘emerging hero into national laughing stock,’ the omniscient nameless narrator tells us dourly, may have had something to do with the fact that he mixed the tokens of secular modernization (theoretical physics), the then-fashionable theosophy of Annie Besant, and the ‘search among modernizing Indian intellectuals of the period for some secularist definition of the spiritual life’ with Mahatma Gandhi’s own quasi-political cocktail of an ‘insistence on the oneness of all India’s widely differing millions’ (20). Epifania’s sentiments were decidedly collaborationist, and paradoxically she may have been less disillusioned in postcolonial Indian society than a minority subject who had remained faithful to ‘India’: ‘What are we but Empire’s children?’ she declared, ‘British have given us everything, isn’t it?’ (18). These sentiments were echoed by her son, Aires (18). She was not disabused of her Anglophilia even when the news of the Amritsar Massacre ‘destroyed the Anglophilia of almost every Indian,’ including that of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who returned his knighthood to the King in protest (22). In supporting Nehruvian secularism, Camoens, unlike his brother Aires, was in the tradition of his father – he was a Nehruvian modernist who feared
that ‘[i]n the city we are for secular India but the village is for Ram,’ the hero of the Hindu epic *The Ramayana* (51, 53). The novel pointedly opposes to Camoens’s vision Aries’s much less sanguine, rude, but disillusioned elitist attitude which could on occasion descend to the level of making up insulting names for those who belong to the lower classes (57).

Francisco’s and Camoens’s vision of an Indian future can be said to represent the possible democratic future envisaged by Nehru – the future that fifty years after Independence seems to have receded from rather than approached the present. It is also the future that a subaltern might wish for, were such a subaltern to be heard. This shared goal of national oneness of minorities and majorities was perhaps always intended to be Utopian, a necessary fiction. It was an ideal in which Nehru, Gandhi and even the great leader of the Untouchables, B. R. Ambedkar, all imagined as an ideal, from their admittedly divergent perspectives, as the ‘lost object’ a democratic society must pursue. In historical terms, however, it is important to ask how (India’s) democratic processes actually fell short of the ideal. Was it because the nation’s leaders have repeatedly underestimated the scope of communalist fragmentation and the inexorability of social stratification (caste, class, ethnicity, religion)?

Rushdie’s novel renders the distance the nation today has in fact moved away from that Utopian vision of a harmoniously multicultural and unified postcolonial India, and suggests that this divergence may not be a bad thing. The key is to ask what this means for an ethico-political agenda. How are we to understand the historical failure of decolonization in the Third World between the conceptual poles of modernity’s unfulfilled or failed project in the West, on the one side, and the ethico-political exigencies of postcolonial subject-formation and nationalist projects, on the other? This question is admittedly large; but it is necessary for an assessment of Rushdie’s oeuvre to consider it. What is important, again in historical terms, is that the occasion

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47 In Camoens’s ‘determination that the British imperium must end and the rule of princes along with it,’ the Moor remarks wryly that he ‘see[s] that hate-the-sin-and-love-the-sinner sweetness, that historical generosity of spirit, which is one of the true wonders of India. When Empire’s sun set, we didn’t slaughter our erstwhile masters, saving that privilege for one another’ (33). Camoens committed suicide, like his father Francisco before him, and it was long after his death, and after independence, that the first Marxist government in the sub-continent was elected in Kerala, ‘the vindication of all his broken hopes’ (33). He is an anticolonialist, with deep feeling for his ‘whole captured land’ (51). Camoens had organized a Lenin Troupe made up of local actors imitating Lenin in their various local languages (30). These local proletarian actors are rejected by a more authentic Russian represented – and this humiliation disenchants Camoens from his Communist enthusiasm and sends him into the arms of the Nehruvian Congress Party (31).
for Rushdie’s novel happens to be the rise of militant Hindu ethnonationalism, of majoritarian universalism in India. Ethnonationalism seeks to ‘forget’ the crucial and constitutive relation between the majority and those that it others. It refuses to acknowledge its responsibility to those others (and this is where the ethico-political imperative arises for Rushdie). Hindutva, on this account, aspires in a degraded way to the ideal of the relationless, monocultural absolute described by Jean-Luc Nancy: ‘This absolute can appear in the form of the Idea, History, the Individual, the State, Science, the Work of Art, and so on. Its logic will always be the same inasmuch as it is without relation.’ Of course, as Nancy also observes, in logical terms the absolute ‘must be the absolute of its own absoluteness, or not be at all. [...] To be absolutely alone, it is not enough that I be so; I must be alone in my being alone – and this of course is contradictory. The logic of the absolute violates the absolute’ (4).

Nancy theorizes the always-already deconstructed status of the absolute State. I would argue, however, that in everyday practice there is no guarantee that this deconstructive logic will guard against – or magically ‘undo’ – the marginalization or dispossession of the minorities within a political strategy such as that of the Hindu extreme right nationalists. The majority in power can blithely finesse or ignore the merely logical conundrum Nancy posits in its bid to incorporate minorities, to absorb them and so rob them of the oxygen of a real tolerance of cultural difference, and a real commitment to ongoing negotiation of claims made by minorities on social institutions (the other side of governmentality, if you will). In its totalizing dream of the Hindu nation, the absolutist majority’s statist discourse cannot really respect cultural difference, cannot permit the irruption of exteriority within the borders of the nation-space. The expense of energy invested in managing those borders is considerable but necessary, for as Immanuel Wallerstein remarks, there is an increasing visibility of minorities in every country today. Wallerstein identifies a central ‘schizophrenia’ of the nation-state – on the one hand encouraging diversity and on the other pressing uniformity on all within its purview. Culture, as he goes on to say, has always translated as ‘a weapon of the powerful.’ Of course it also can be used against the powerful


50 Wallerstein, p.99.
in cultural resistance, and it would seem that it is such a cultural resistance that Rushdie’s *oeuvre* poses against the cultural dominant. That, at least, would seem to be the goal, although Rushdie perhaps would demur that he is under no illusions about the actual political effectivity of fiction.

On this view, J. M. Coetzee’s otherwise suggestive reading of this book can be seen as having missed an important feature. Coetzee writes that Rushdie’s novel is a palimpsestic or ‘Palimpsestine’ project ‘not overpainting India in the sense of blotting it out with a fantasy alternative, but laying an alternative, promised-land text or texturation over it like gauze.’\textsuperscript{51} He suggests that Rushdie’s palimpsesting is ultimately a (belletristic?) substitution of a fantasy in place of reality – and by implication an ethico-political cop-out, as Coetzee’s own politically charged work has never been. In fact, Rushdie’s fantasies or phantasmagorias are always politically inflected. Muslim separatism in Jammu and Kashmir, the fighting over the Ayodhya mosque, the protests against the ‘scheduled caste’ allowances for admission to educational institutions and jobs – these and other real issues exert a pressure on the fiction inescapably, so that the fictive is not for Rushdie a relief from reality but its intensification, sometimes as a counterpart to the surreal. Rushdie’s attempt is not to gauze-over the reality of the multiethnic ‘mess’ (161) of modern India as Coetzee accuses but to delineate the failure of a grand dream, of a political project. In my view, the (ethico-political) failure of Rushdie’s novel, if that is what it is, is not that it presents a fantasy to supplant reality but that the protagonist’s fantasy usurps a minoritarian discourse without having examined or grasped the ‘nomoscopic’ implications fully.

\textsuperscript{51} Coetzee, p.13. Rushdie’s palimpsestic tale of one man’s denatured existence recounts a personal dispossession which is also a synecdoche for the larger disinheritance of minorities from true citizenship in postcolonial India and perhaps a fictionalized representation of the author’s own denaturalization as a human being by the religious edict, the fatwa. Such palimpsesting is a very conscious device and has been noted by critics such as Coetzee. The Moor himself says: ‘Mine is the story of the fall from grace of a high-born cross-breed [...] and of my banishment from what I had every right to think of as my natural life by my mother’ (5). And he goes on to make the historical connection: ‘What was true of history in general was true of our family’s fortunes in particular’ (6).

Besides, the title of the novel refers to the moment in 1492 when, ‘while Christopher Columbus watched in wonderment and contempt, the Sultan Boabdil had surrendered the keys to the fortress palace of the Alhambra, last and greatest of all the Moors’ fortifications, to the all-conquering Catholic Kings Fernando and Isabella, giving up his principality without so much as a battle. He departed into exile with his mother and retainers, bringing to a close the centuries of Moorish Spain; and reining in his horse upon the Hill of Tears he turned to look for one last time upon his loss’ (80). This episode invokes the themes of imperialism and exile as proleptically referring to the postcolonial.
It is just for this reason that I want to prevent the obscuring of the central ethico-political question raised by the novel. My sense is that the novel is motivated by a deep concern with the responsibility of facilitating meaningful access, for everyone and not just the elite few, to the political and institutional processes of the nation-state, even particularly the responsibility of facilitating real citizenship for the minorities, rather than just talking about inclusion, tolerance and multiculturalism and thereby absorbing and abstracting away the concerns of the minorities. In other words, I want to resist the sentimentalizing and marginalizing of the individual’s (bourgeois or not) ethico-political responsibilities occluded by the fashionable tendency in cultural studies towards the grander ethico-political pronouncements about governmentality or governance. Even at the level of the individual, questions concerning governmentality sometimes displace questions of individual morality. To point this out is emphatically not to endorse a conservative or reactionary position on regulating the personal domain or policing the public sphere. No hegemonic group should be allowed to dictate morality; no state should be granted total (Oedipal?) authority over the Law, even if it formulates laws. Democracy is a matter of agonistic negotiation, and means nothing without procedural constraints.

At the same time, the question of individual moral and ethical responsibility is a question that risks being elided by the more explicitly ‘governmental’ issue of the criminality of the Moor’s behaviour (counterpoised though it may be to Hindu fundamentalist violence) and its rationalization or self-justification by an appeal to the traumatic circumstances of Moraes’s inexcusable marginalization. What do we make of the Moor’s shifting allegiances, his interludes as a member of Mainduck’s Hindu fundamentalist hit squads? Is the Moor’s turn to crime to be excused on the basis of his victimization? To the extent the victimization is linked to ethnicity, his membership in an ‘out’ group, is his criminal behaviour simply to be written off as a forgivably confused attempt to belong to an ‘in’ group even if it is sought by participation in the violent victimization of others? In the novel the problematic of the place (structural location) of minorities in the nation is projected from the axis of class to the axis of ethnicity, although

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52 If the novel thematizes the Moor’s incompleteness as a representation of the incompleteness of the minority subject as such, there is also a curious inwardness and lassitude about the Moor’s character that is at odds with the programmatic Utopianism of the author’s project. This inwardness and lassitude, aspects of the subject’s incompleteness, one could describe as a kind of *akrasia* (a weakness of will-power or an incompleteness of control over oneself, one’s desires and one’s destiny) that is in danger of becoming an alibi for the Moor. It is as though his very incompleteness functions to let him off the hook, somehow.
this displacement is not the same thing as a representation of class and ethnicity, categories that are chained in discursive space (in my view this is a more accurate description of the situation). Is this displacement not the expression of a bourgeois intellectual anxiety not to be aligned with the majoritarian forces of Hindutva (or programmatically Hindu Indianness)? My focus here is on another displacement: Moraes’s middle-class narrative seems to usurp the discourse of hybridity, and so has the ironic effect of constantly reminding us of the middle-class perspective of the author. If he wants to investigate the situation of the marginalized why does Rushdie invest hybridity in a middle-class character, however unfortunate his personal circumstances? Why is it given to the Moor to claim the moral high ground of subalternity? Is this subaltern envy?

Again, this as I see it is the ethico-political question at risk of being underestimated by readers and critics because of the politically correct face that the novel presents to them. Readers and critics may well be tempted to look sympathetically on Moraes’s desire to align himself with the subaltern and in so doing to rationalize his individual ethical choices – and his patently unethical violence – on the basis of that unexamined and bracketed identification. If ‘ethics’ is related to ethos (the group identity) then the cultural location of the group as ethnic minority should not be too rapidly assimilated with the individual’s socioeconomic positionality, particularly not someone such as the Moor. The overdetermination of the sign of ‘minority,’ taken together with other minority positionalities (women, homosexuals, and others) dramatizes the actual frailty of these constituencies within the national space. And this frailty may prevent us, in

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53 The Christians are a minority, but there are even divisions within the Christian community (623). Oliver D’Aeth is an almost humorously marginal figure, suffering from photophobia in the strong Indian light where the sun has already set on the Empire, and whose name (the text itself provides the homonym ‘Allover Death’ [94]) hints that he is the very representative not of the light the colonizer presumed to bring to the Eastern colony but of darkness and death. In this respect his name is significantly opposed to that of the doomed but bright figure of Aurora. More generally Reverend D’Aeth stands here for the marginalization of the English; like it, he was undone by the heat and uncertainties (what Forster called the ‘muddle’) of India (93). The Portuguese are a minority, too and it is significant that this is the story of the da Gamas. Emily Elphinstone remarks to the Reverend, who is besotted with Aurora, with her odour of ‘sex and pepper,’ that ‘[t]hose people don’t belong here any more than we do, but at least we can go home. One day India will turn against them, too, and they’ll have to sink or swim.’ The Reverend demurs, saying that in the South anyway ‘there was little communal trouble of that sort’ but he is ‘ferociously’ shouted down. Emily insists that they were ‘outcasts’ – a terrible word which seems to exploit the echo of a more sinister homonym, emerging from the caste system – ‘these peculiar Christians with their unrecognizable hobson-jobson services, not to mention these dying-out Jews, they were the least important people in the world, the tiniest of the tiny’ (98).
an age of political correctness, from closely interrogating the Moor’s self-construction as minority subject or even subaltern.

I have been suggesting that Moraes presents himself as representative of the nation’s failure to meet the standard of pluralism, and that in a (cynically?) astute move, he also performs his disappearance as a loss of agency within the nation’s ‘plurality’ (as he conceives it in the novel’s diegetic space). But Moraes also fantasizes himself as the embodiment of the city of Bombay/Mumbai, thus linking moral and geographical space, or emotional and geopolitical landscapes. He also performs a politically representative gesture. He presents himself as a marginal member of the welter of humanity that is Bombay: ‘Like the city itself [...] I mushroomed into a huge urbane sprawl of a fellow. [...] How [...] could I have turned out to be anything but a mess? [...] Much that was corruptible in me has been corrupted; much that was perfectible, but also capable of being demolished, has been lost’ (161-2). But what about individual accountability, what about an analysis of the individual’s ethical corruption? Is that to take second place to the trauma of loss? The loss sustained by Moraes is not of the same order or character as the loss sustained by minorities in India – but that is what the analogy with the ‘city’ seems to obscure, and the image of ‘urbane’ sprawl calls for an analysis which unpacks the class markings elided by the addition of the final letter in ‘urbane’ to the more familiar and expected predicative ‘urban.’ (Surely this is not a misprint but a cleverly understated pun, or perhaps something more telling?).

Moraes’s presents his victimhood itself as exculpatory trauma, as a psychodynamic that rationalizes his alignment with other subalterns within the nation-state. He regards himself as a demoralized subject, a representative of the subaltern. In the newly Independent India, his own recognition and respect as a minority Indian citizen are up for grabs. Not only is he an ethnic minority, with Muslim (‘Moorish’), Christian, and Jewish antecedents, but a victim also of physical handicaps – his body ages twice as fast as normal, and one arm is no more than a fleshy hammer, the only use for which, he discovers, is literally to club other minorities into submission, in intercommunal violence. It is as though his progeria and his deformity index his handicap as an ethnic minority subject – and as though it were natural to turn these handicaps into alibis and weapons that the weak may use against the strong. He feels a deficit of ‘recognition’ from the community and country as minority member several times over. He finds himself abandoned by his father Abraham, unjustly rejected by his mother Aurora, cruelly betrayed by his lover Uma, and unloved and unable to save the one person with whom he might have found love and wholeness, Aoi Uë.
The Moor’s deformed arm and his progeria index the way in which he is also minoritized in terms of his physical disability as if to make one even less inclined to interrogate his personal ethics. The trauma of the self, its ‘secret,’ is cathetced onto, ‘contained in,’ the ‘deformed limb which I had thrust for too long into the depths of my clothing’ (295) – this is one of Moraes’s most self-reflexive moments. The physical reality of the Moor’s accelerated being is registered as the speeding heaviness of his body, an image perhaps of the exaggerated speed at which neocolonial global restructurings and internal tensions in decolonized nations such as India have yielded to a disillusionment with the new dispensation. The signifier of the wounded body is linked in the Symbolic register to the signifier of the wounded, cloven postcolonial nation. If in the original Greek sense trauma referred to a physical wound, then with Sigmund Freud it had already come to signify a psychic wound; in the novel the trauma is sustained by the minority subject as well as the nation as it emerges through the unsettling moment of Independence.

An incipient or experienced political trauma often propels the sufferer to seek comfort in belonging to an identity group. In this connection voluntarism and pluralism are intimately linked to trauma, and the most vivid examples are the Rwandan, Bosnian, South African cases. To these can be juxtaposed the Indian experience of communal violence dating back to the Partition of India in 1947, at the moment of Independence. The Moor compulsively reiterates his painful failure to find a whole identity as an equivalence between his own marginality and that of other ethnic minorities in India; and his personal trauma is allegorized as an echo of the nation’s experience of emerging into the postcolonial age. On the basis of this aggregate of handicaps, accidents, betrayals, bad luck ‘ethnicity,’ Moraes claims that his story is ‘the story of the fall from grace of a high-born crossbreed,’ the story of ‘my banishment from what I had every right to think of as my natural life’ (5) of the ‘defeat for the pluralist philosophy on which we had all been raised’ (272), and of the unmitigated ‘tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by One’ (408). What ethical or political stake can such a demoralized creature have in a society he perceives as unjust?

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54 As Cathy Caruth points out, Freud’s understanding of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was that ‘the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor’, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.4.
The Moor’s misfortunes have ramifications beyond his personal story of course. They become a way not only to highlight the ethico-political perplexities of governance with reference to the traumatized minorities, but also to remember the Partition of India as one source of the persistent difficulties faced by minorities. The Partition is after all a defining event in Rushdie’s fiction (Midnight’s Children in particular). Thus Saadat Hasan Manto’s Toba Tek Singh is mentioned in The Moor’s Last Sigh as a ‘great story’ of the partition of India, a story dramatizing a traumatic choice between being Muslim and not being Muslim, being Indian or being Pakistani. The trauma that split the imago of the preexisting national subject is re-presented by a figuration of repetition itself: the ‘partition of the subcontinent’s lunatics at the time of the larger Partition’ (173). Just as Gandhi’s triumph, the winning of Satyagraha (the war of truth for Independence), was soured by interethnic hatred between Hindus and Muslims, so today India risks a similar interethnic division between minorities (and not only Muslims) and Hindus. This is a lesson in the ethico-political: without a pluralist ideology, democratic justice is unachievable. But it is also as though Rushdie wants to suggest that the trauma of Partition is an unassimilated historical lesson for contemporary India, and to lend a historical depth to this exploration of an India at a moment when a specific majoritarian ideology (Hindutva) happened to be in the ascendant.

The historical dimension indexed by the reference to the Partition, then, is not just casual. Rushdie problematizes ethnicity as a traumatic category that erupts in the postcolonial nation at the precise moment that nationalism is asserted through repetition (India is Hindu, said Indira Gandhi, and under the BJP this fetish-like slogan was the chorus of the extreme right wing factions) and repression (the deliberate forgetting of the minorities) – suggesting that the political significance of ethnicity may be nothing more than the relative power of one group over another. Ethnicity may be experienced by some minorities as traumatic exclusion and oppression but paradoxically also what defines them, as the determining difference, in political terms, of an identity group. Do they not primarily experience their marginality as the trauma of unbelonging and perpetual abjection – does trauma not become their defining characteristic? Perhaps then it is not an exaggeration to say that in all of Rushdie’s major fiction (Shame, Midnight’s Children, The Satanic Verses, and The Moor’s Last Sigh), trauma and loss, or lack, are figured as defining the marginal or the subaltern, or at least as somehow the anchor of the subject (consider Sufiya Zenobia, Saleem Sinai, Gibreel Farishta, and Moraes Zogoiby, important characters in those major works, respectively). Every other aspect of Moraes’s identity except the psychic/physical wound
seems to dissolve as soon as it takes shape. Aurora paints the Moor’s image first as an embodiment of pluralism whose being once had a ‘national’ resonance, but then later she can only paint him as a somewhat attenuated hybrid who, as he grows older, becomes a degraded traumatized figure who is stripped of ‘his previous role as a unifier of opposites, a standard-bearer of pluralism, ceasing to stand as a symbol – however approximate – of the new nation. [...] This “Black Moor” was a new imagining of the idea of the hybrid – a Baudelairean flower [...] of evil’ (303; emphasis original). It is probably safe to say that the disabled in India are clearly a minority who as a group are far less politicized and far less empowered than their counterparts in Britain or the U.S. It may seem that the lowest moment of the Moor’s saga is when he fully adapts himself to the ‘[s]outhpaw, sinister, cuddly-wiftie, keggy-fistie, corrie-paw’ (153) role provided for him by the crafty leader of the Hindu vigilantes, Raman ‘Mainduck’ Fielding. But in the context of his whole story the significance of his actions needs more careful consideration. His minoritization as an ‘ugly[,] malformed, wrong, freak of nature’ (154) makes him envious of even so perverse an anchor for identity as Vasco Miranda’s fable of a needle lost somewhere inside him which at once defined his life and was destined to be its nemesis (154-5).

Thus we return to a central ethico-political question: What is the Moor’s loss exactly – and is he really as bereft as the subaltern in India? Is the Moor’s assimilation with the subaltern warranted in fact? If we are emancipated from the so-called myth of authenticity, and if we are not limited to the problematic of who-speaks-for-whom, can we say that Moraes’s actions raise no ethico-political questions? Every other aspect of the Moor’s identity apart from his literal and psychic trauma dissolves away. He cannot rely on family, ethnicity, national citizenship, or even love. The Moor’s traumatized body is cast as the only ontic anchor of his personal identity. Again the background for this conceit is the fact that the true subaltern frequently has few material possessions other than the body, so that it is in the body that all the pain of living is inscribed and so that survival is nothing if not a matter of keeping body together with soul. Against this background the ethico-political nuances of the Moor’s situation become clearer. If indeed, as I have argued above, exclusion and loss, or ‘lack,’ rather than quasi-scientific criteria such as phenotype or even supposed lineage and so on defines an identity group, then what is entailed by a middle class subject’s elective affinity with such a group? Is it an ethico-political right, or a transgression for Moraes to identify himself as a minority subject?

The disillusioned Moraes, late in the story, allows his clubbed right arm to be conscripted by Mainduck as a weapon with which to batter other
minorities. Why does the Moor slip into evil through trauma, as it were? Does his status as an ethnically marginalized individual exonerate his violent behaviour as Mainduck’s literal right arm man? Does the Moor not become evil precisely when he does embrace his fate, as the boy-mahaguru Lord Khusro Khusrovani Bhagwan had counseled him: ‘embrace your fate [...] rejoice in what gives you grief. [...] Only by becoming your misfortune will you transcend it’ (163)? Does he not embrace his fate by becoming what his weapon-like dead arm decrees, namely an agent of destruction? If his trauma and loss are the sole source of his subjectivity, it is ironic that he finds his voice only in violently silencing others in his turn.

The crisis of his tragedy occurs at the precise moment when he describes how he comes to resort to violence as a consequence of his own victimization and demoralization. But what is remarkable is that he finds ‘his true self’ at the moment of his most total and abject de-moralization, when he gives up all moral restraint and resorts to violence against other minorities. The question for me is, how can he have come to this pass – how can he have come to believe that his true and complete self could only be achieved through violence against others who shared his own experience of being incompletely recognized and respected in their society? It is in complex ways that the liberal theme of an ethical responsibility for self-determination and self-completion is tied to the topoi of ethnicity and envy – envy particularly of those whose desire for revenge appears to have ethical justification ready to hand. We can read subaltern envy then as a version of Friedrich Nietzsche’s ressentiment, in which an unjust reality causes a great desire for some kind of revenge, and requires a degree of rationalization, even self-deception, in order to justify the distortion of existing mores.

Admittedly, Aurora and other characters in the novel besides Moraes are also presented as embodying the traumatically incomplete citizenship of India’s minorities. In particular, Vasco, who recognizes some similarity between his own condition and that of the Moor, is similarly a traumatized figure, and never more so than on the fateful night of decolonization, 15 August 1947:

[T]he contradictions of that high moment tore him apart. That celebration of freedom whose engulfing emotions he could not avoid even though, as a Goan, he was technically not involved, and which, to his horror, was taking place while great blood-rivers were still flowing in the Punjab, destroyed the fragile equilibrium at the heart of his invented self, and set the madman free. (165)

Partition, a kind of traumatic disarticulation of the nation, is echoed in Vasco’s trauma rendered as mental disarticulation.
The minority subject is sometimes analogized as a sub-version of the mythos of the unified nation, simultaneously representing the nation synecdochically, part for whole, and giving the lie to its founding mythologies. But this subversion should not therefore be construed as necessarily empowering – since in Foucauldian terms, subversion is not the effect of the subject’s agency so much as an effect of the very dynamic, through time, of the national narrative’s reiteration: the more nation-ness is asserted by structures and institutions in power, the more it is imperilled, disarticulated. Ethico-political activism has a place in interrupting the mythologies of Hindu nationalism and in insisting on social justice through the sort of pluralism to which Rushdie is deeply committed. Only an ethico-political insistence on a politics of recognition that actively represents the perspective of minorities can achieve a just pluralist society. Both the ontological and the ethico-political perspectives are necessary. My point is that it is precisely the depth of this commitment on the part of the author that makes it incumbent upon us to investigate the issues in representative politics raised by the characterization of the Moor.

That is to say that if the Moor’s story raises questions about Rushdie’s own politics of representation, there should be no question that the author is indeed unequivocal in his condemnation of the exclusivist monoculturalist national narrative of Hindu nationalism. If this subversion is ambivalently effected by the Moor’s outlandish case, there is a wealth of other evidence and other characters to attest to the degree of Rushdie’s commitment to the idea of pluralism. For instance, Vasco’s drunken diatribe delivers a powerful postcolonial critique of India as redeemable only through the dismantling of the nation-state. The very presence of minority subjects within the nation space signals an important tension in postcolonial India, and as one of the traumatized minorities, Vasco is sane enough, though drunk and mad, to scream out his trauma to the ethnic minority guests celebrating Independence at Aurora and Abraham’s house:

Circular sexualist India my foot; No. Bleddy tongue twister came out wrong. Secular-socialist. [...] Bleddy bunk. [...] You think India’ll just roll over, all those bloodthirsty bloodsoaked gods’ll just roll over and die. [...] Let me give you a tip. Only one power in this damn country is strong enough to stand up against those gods and it isn’t blankety blank sockular specialism. It isn’t blankety blank Pandit Nehru and his blankety blank protection-of-minorities Congress watch-wallahs. [...] I’ll tell you what it is. Corruption. You get me? Bribery and. (166; emphases original)

55 Later the Moor would reflect that Vasco was wrong, because ‘a class of “Macaulay’s Minutemen” would hate the best of India. [...] We were not, had never been, that class. [...] In some of us, the worst triumphed; but still we could say – and say truthfully – that we had loved
Vasco’s diatribe points up some crucial ethical and political fissures in Indian secular socialism with regard to minorities and proleptically diagnoses the fate of interethnic divisions in the newly Independent India.

If, as the contemporary wisdom goes, the two major forms of the ‘national’ are the civic institutional and the ethnonational, ‘the Moor’ emerges as a sign of the exclusion of minoritarian constituencies from both. And as an emblem of incomplete citizenship, he himself comes as close as is possible to embodying radical difference. Like his father he comes to feel that ‘corruption’ is the only politically effective way to kick against his minoritization – it is as though he has come to believe that, since he has little stake in society, he is beyond the pale of ethics, beyond good and evil. But he can only represent his discontentment and *ressentiment* through fantasy.

With evident irony, Moraes envisions a phantasmatic self-flaying that would allow him to re-enter the world

> like an anatomy illustration from *Encyclopedia Britannica* [...] set free from the otherwise inescapable jails of colour, race, and clan.’ This is on the face of it not self-mortification but an attempt to uncover, by a *via negativa*, his shared humanity as an alternative to the oppressive totalizing universalism of the majority. His somewhat forlorn hope is to lay bare ‘his secret identity – the secret, that is, of the identity of all men – of standing before the war-painted braves to unveil the flayed and naked unity of the flesh. (414; emphasis added)

It would be a great mistake, however, to describe this as a variety of essentialism. This flaying is like the peeling of an onion, intended not to hypostatize another universalism about the sameness of human beings everywhere and for all time but instead to *counter* what Rushdie most deplores about India – that ‘[i]n Indian country, there was no room for a man who didn’t want to belong to a tribe, who dreamed of moving beyond’ (414). This is the realm of the ethico-political.

Rushdie is admittedly not interested in a general theory of minority subjectivity. He *is* interested in conceptual *deformation* of the ‘national’ citizen sensitive to the epistemological and ethico-political ramifications of such a deformation, but again that is never, for him, *merely* a bellettristic experiment. He ‘dream[s] of moving beyond’ into a postnational future where minorities like everyone else can negotiate fairly for their demands on the state. The Moor’s story, as much about community as it is about self, reminds us that the intensified sense of human beings being bound together...
in the experience of bodily fragility in space and time could conceivably help to repair a broken socius in a secular liberal pluralism. Evidently it has not yet done so. But if on the other hand religion in India too has betrayed its etymologically ordained function of binding people together, then what glue could give meaning to a postcolonial nation-state? There is religion, there are the popular movies, and then there is Art. It is through Art that Aurora wants to will her own survival beyond what she sees is the impending doom of India’s minorities. In a parody of Vasco’s drunken harangue on Independence Night, and ‘without troubling to acknowledge his copyright, she details the coming destructions of her guests’ who are a motley crew of artists and ‘demi-mondaines’ of various national origins and persuasions: ‘Imitations of life! Historical anomalies! Centaurs! [...] Mixtures, mongrels [...]. Fishes out of water! Bad times are coming, darlings’ (172). It is this fate of the misfits that she hopes to escape ‘on account, you miserable wretches, of my Art’ (172). Aurora falls to her death protesting the majoritarian Hindutva’s triumphalism (315); Vasco flees to Andalusia but finds himself minoritized – shunned there as well – because, as he is told: ‘Men and women who leave their natural places are less than human’ (327). This is profoundly ironic for him, for the land he had left was never unproblematically a natural home for him either.

G. W. F. Hegel, in the *Philosophy of Right*, recognized that religion was at the core of ethnicity. That observation is corroborated by seeing that the corruption of the religious – and thus in one sense of the ethical – is at the core of the communalist violence among consanguineous ethnic groups – so that blood and belief become the basis for ‘belonging.’ The Moor’s misadventures in ethnic (mis)identification remind us that Indian Muslims do not and cannot ordinarily ‘choose’ Hinduness even though they clearly recognize the convenient rhetorical majoritarian equation of Hindutva with Indianness – an ironic equation if one takes the long view to recognize that Hinduism was brought to India by Indo-European invaders who subjugated a more aboriginal group, the Dravidians. ‘Indian culture’ therefore is itself hybrid, ‘a rich mixture of traditions,’ and not an ‘exclusive, and excluding, Hindu’ category. Elsewhere, Rushdie has acknowledged the importance of the fact that writing about the subcontinent, he had to confront the issue of

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religion, implying perhaps that the very definitions of Pakistan and India had to do with religion construed as attribute of national belonging:

As for religion, my work, much of which has been concerned with India and Pakistan, has made it essential for me to confront the issue of religious faith. Even the form of my writing was affected. If one is to attempt honestly to describe reality as it is experienced by religious people, for whom God is no symbol but an everyday fact, then the conventions of what is called realism are quite inadequate. [...] A form must be created which allows the miraculous and the mundane to co-exist at the same level – as the same order of event.\textsuperscript{59}

But the novel suggests an even richer problematization of hybridity.

The dream of national unity under a collective consciousness or conscience, a single narrative of inclusion, is an elusive and debatable goal. Not only does it leave unresolved the extremely slippery question of \textit{cultural difference}, but it also sounds too good to be true. As a sort of reality check, Rushdie documents the vicious monoculturalism that invariably accompanies calls for a singularist national narrative. Raman `Mainduck’ Fielding represents one extreme version of it: ‘In his bizarre conception of cricket as a fundamentally communalist game, essentially Hindu but with its Hindu-ness constantly under threat from the country’s other, treacherous communities, lay the origins of his political philosophy, and of “Mumbai’s Axis” itself’ (231). Aurora is decried by Mainduck’s friends as a ‘Christian artist’ and, to add insult to injury, ‘married to a Jew’ (234). This communalism intensified after Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, which began in 1975. As the Moor puts it, ‘[b]efore the Emergency we were Indians, after it we were Christian Jews’ (235). Mainduck’s rabid nationalist and patriarchalist ideology is a panic ideology, one of whose features is precisely that it misappropriates the rhetoric of inclusion and tolerance. On the other hand it conjures up bizarreries such as the ‘manufacture of high-technology minority-rights cybermen to attack and murder Hindus,’ and ‘the march of minority babies who will push our blessed infants from their cots and grab their sacred food’ (295). Mainduck ‘was against unions, in favour of breaking strikes, against working women, in favour of sati […]', against “immigrants” to the city, by which he meant all non-Marathi speakers. [...] He derided the Marxist analysis of society as class struggle and lauded the Hindu preference for the eternal stability of caste’ (298-9). He spoke messianically ‘of the need to 	extit{tame the country’s minorities}, to subject one and all to the tough-loving rule of Ram’ (309; emphasis original). The Mumbai Axis salute was, not

\textsuperscript{59} Rushdie, \textit{Imaginary}, p.376.
Ethnicity and Sexuality: Parallel Paradigms of Minoritization

An important complication in the novel is the imbrication of ethnicity and sexuality. Sexuality is second in importance only to ethnicity as a flashpoint for identity politics. Rushdie highlights the hypocrisy of insisting on ethnic purity and exclusion or marginalization on the basis of race, but it is worth reminding ourselves that the insistence on ethnic purity and fears of miscegenation and the threatened disappearance of an ethnic group often has subconscious underpinnings in sexual anxieties. The narrative frequently interweaves ethnicity with sexuality. Flory, who disapproves of Aurora as Abraham’s wife because of her race, is reminded by him that their own family’s history involved miscegenation between a Spanish Arab and a Spanish Jew who left Boabdil and came to India, eventually to become the ancestor of Abraham. And for love of Aurora, Abraham ‘walk[s] away from his race, looking back only once’ – and he would even have converted to Christianity if that had been necessary (89-90). Flory seeks her revenge when Abraham comes begging for funds to bail him out of a bad business situation, and she insists on his giving her his firstborn son to raise as a Jew; when Aurora hears of this deal she turns Abraham away from their bed. Flory goes mad and dies – the last of the Cochin Jews, and only then does Aurora consent to having sex with her husband, though this is a temporary reconciliation (119-20). Thus, almost immediately Abraham recognizes his marginality in the marriage, and ultimately this family feud also takes on an epic resonance with the national family’s story of not getting along although sharing the same space and time. Aurora’s grandmother had cursed her for her callously letting her die, saying that ‘a house divided against itself cannot stand,’ a curse that could well stand for the danger faced by ethnically nations like India, not to speak of the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, and more recently Burundi.

But what Rushdie puts forward with one hand (in pointing to the hypocrisy of racist purism and ethnic absolutism, as linked to nationalism) he takes away with the other. After establishing Abraham’s position on race, the evidence for which turns on the fact that the family name is Zogoiby rather than Castile and that there is reputed to be a royal crown hidden in the family’s possession somewhere, the Moor observes, ‘[i]t isn’t hard to demolish Abraham’s arguments. What’s in a name? The da Gamas claimed
descent from Vasco the explorer. [...] Who in the whole of India cares two paisa about heirlooms if he’s given the choice between old stuff and money in the bank?” (84-5). Genealogy, ethnicity and racial purity, Rushdie seems to be saying, are important not so much for themselves, but for the uses to which they are put by people in the struggle for power, status, money – us against them – and to stir the dark water of sexual anxieties from which some of the most virulent racism and xenophobia can spring. To read in the signifiers mobilized by the discourse of racial and social hatred the signifieds of psychosexual anxieties is also an ethico-political imperative.

There is no more charged field of signifiers than in the field of sexuality. Perceptively, Rushdie explores the status of minorities in part by highlighting the status of non-normative sexuality, which otherwise might seem rather a gratuitous distraction. Consider Aires’s homosexuality, Solomon’s bisexuality (see 13, 77), and Vasco Miranda’s Bacchic Orphic bisexual sprees (see 13, 49, 150, 165). Rushdie foregrounds the racial and sexual (or gender) inequities of contemporary India in a liberal pluralist counter-coding of value. Aires on his wedding night dons his frightened bride’s gown and goes off to a rendez-vous with a boatman (13) – limning a condition of ‘deviant sexuality’ he shares with Solomon (77) and Vasco Miranda (150). Rushdie ventriloquizes through the Moor’s mouth: ‘There is much about him that I do not care for; but in the image of his queenliness, where many back home (and not only back home) would see degradation, I see his courage, his capacity, yes, for glory’ (14). Similarly, speaking of Camoens’s mutable political allegiances and unsolid nationalism, Moraes says:

How easy to dismiss him as a butterfly, a lightweight, a dilettante! A revolutionary firebrand in the company of a few friends [...], a nationalist whose favourite poets were all English, a professed atheist and rationalist who could bring himself to believe in ghosts. [...] To me, the doubleness in Grandfather Camoens reveals his beauty; his willingness to permit the coexistence within himself of conflicting impulses is the source of his full, gentle humaneness. (32; emphasis added).

Rushdie celebrates marginality and doubleness in all its rich suggestiveness in these examples of dissident sexuality, something about which ‘universalist’ interpretations seem rather uninstructive because universalisms are singularist paradigms. A universalist truth about whether or not women’s intelligence is the same as men’s is on this account not a useful question, even if such a universalist truth about gendered intelligence can reliably be put forward. Whether or not African-American intelligence is ‘the same’ as that of white Americans, despite Malik’s concern with this issue, seems to me a fruitless question. Thus too his interest in a ‘standard of significance to
distinguish between real or significant facts and irrelevant ones’ – what precisely would such a universal standard look like, even if historicized? Malik offers the standard of ‘equality’ – but as I suggested in considering the issue of affirmative action, it is not some abstract notion of equality that is needed but rather a debate on and a discourse of equality that allow us to negotiate the meaning of equality given a purpose and a set of interests represented by a community or gathering of communities. And if equality is indeed ‘the specific historic product of modern or capitalist society,’ it is not at all clear that what is considered equality in Sweden would be considered equality in Japan or even the U.S. (and this is to consider only the industrialized world); nor is it clear that it has ‘objective significance.’

African-Americans and white Americans may not agree on what equality means; nor would the poor and the rich, men and women. Even equality cannot be ‘a standard by which we are able to judge political arguments or social practices’ nor ‘a measure by which we can objectively gauge historical and social progress’ nor ‘a criterion by which we can pass judgment on different interpretations of the French Revolution or of IQ differentials in contemporary America.’ This conception of equality, as Malik argues, ‘presumes the existence of a “human essence.”’ And although Rushdie’s celebration sometimes risks sounding like bourgeois humanist cliché, it also introduces an alternative signification of a to-be-realized signified, that is to say, the signification of an India that would not be just Hindu, heterosexualist and masculinist – or otherwise singularist. His somewhat canned and programmatic pluralism about sex explains why non-heterosexual relationships appear so prominently and positively in the novel as well as why there are so many ‘glorious female characters’ (as Jessica Hagedorn puts it) in the novel, alongside what I have suggested is a profusion of fungible ethnic positionalities. The celebration of marginality in sexual politics gestures synecdochically towards a celebration of multiculturalism tout court.

60 Malik, p.13.
61 Malik, p.13.
63 Malik, p.15.
65 Not all these strong women are of course admirable. Besides, in Rushdie’s novel, the strength of women can only take them so far. Belle, for example, resolves the family feud by dividing the da Gama house, and continues to rule her half with firmness. But if she is one of the strong women of the book, Carmen sees herself as marginal – so that even among the strong women there are some who are more equal than others.
The *celebration* of multiculturalism is often a politically empty gesture even in the realm of sexuality if it is only Utopian or, worse, a bow to political correctness about ‘cultural difference.’ In the novel, regrettably, the celebration of sexually marginalized figures yields few answers to the larger questions of sexual ethics and politics, although it clearly raises such questions. Witness the Uma episode, in which a woman is portrayed as thoroughly unprincipled. Or consider the case of Aoi Uë, in whom the Moor glimpses the embodiment of a kind of pluralism – ‘Her name,’ he marvels, ‘was a miracle of vowels [...] the five enabling sounds of language’ (423). Moraes fails to ‘defend’ her ‘like a man’ and so he is condemned to ‘weep like a woman’ (432). Is this not once again an image for the failure of the hope of pluralism? But if so, why is it presented in this stereotype of gender roles? Nor does it offset the fact that sexually marginal figures and sexual ‘others,’ including women, come across as merely freakish – even Uma is hardly represented in unambiguously positive terms. What does Rushdie’s portrayal of women actually tell us about the ‘glorious female characters’ he so blithely celebrates in the novel?

A particularly potent image of the imbrication of ethnicity and sexuality is the Oedipal relationship of Moraes with his parents. It is as a minority, as a ‘cathjew’ (428), that the Moor seeks both refuge and Vasco Miranda in Benengeli among other ‘rootless’ foreigners and ‘parasites’ (392-3). But his search is also a son’s search for a mother who has rejected him for what she is led by Uma to perceive as his Oedipal sin. And when his father Abraham briefs him on ‘the existence of the secret [Islamic] H-bomb project’ – he embraces the ultimate, universally symbolic minority status as he symbolically ‘murders the Father’ by rejecting his Oedipal *éminence grise*:

“To my astonishment,” I told this shadow-Jehovah, this anti-Almighty, this black hole in the sky, my Daddyji, “excuse me, but I find that I’m a Jew” (336-7). But the Oedipal relationship is not limited to the Moor’s disaffection with his father. Moraes makes the point that

Motherness – excuse me if I underline the point – is a big idea in India, maybe our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet. [...] Nobody who saw [the popular film *Mother India*] ever forgot that glutinous saga of peasant heroinism, that super-slushy ode to the uncrushability of village India made by the most cynical urbanites in the world. (137)

Tied to this is the sentimentalization and heroinization of *peasant* India – assimilated conceptually to the sign of a ‘(m)other India’ where the mother and the peasant are equally satellites of the national – and generated according to the Moor by cynical urbanites like Mehboob Khan, the
filmmaker of the popular film *Mother India*. The mother and the peasant are again figures representing the minority, whose marginalization is an index to the state of the nation. The psycho-political oddities of the film do not go unnoticed here. Aurora remarks that it is passing strange that Nargis, who played the mother in the title role, married Sunil Dutt, the actor who played the son. Vasco Miranda, who mocks the jingoism of such cultural signs, cannot resist developing the Oedipal obliquities in a phrase that seems too clownish for Rushdie not to concede that it might be founded on plausible premises: ‘Sublimation [...] of mutual parent-child longings [...] is deep-rooted in the national psyche [...]’. *Mother India* is the dark side of the Radha-Krishna story, with the subsidiary theme of forbidden love added on. But what the hell; Oedipus-schmoedipus!’ (138; emphasis original). For Bad Birju, as the narrator goes on to say in the words of ‘a critic,’ the Mother here becomes ‘that image of an aggressive, treacherous, annihilating mother who haunts the fantasy life of Indian males’ (139). In other words, the mother is always at risk of becoming the whore. Vasco seems to want to replace the nationalistic image of Mother India by painting Aurora so that (as the Moor speculates) ‘by seeming to be nobody’s mother she indeed became the mother of us all’ – and then palimpsests his own image over the image of this mother as a way of possessing her because he could not possess her in the flesh (160), just as Aurora would in her painting and for her own purposes palimpsest herself over Belle (171). Vasco’s palimpsesting is redoubled in that he presents himself in his painting as ‘The Artist as Boabdil,’ thus displacing not only Ina, but the Moor himself. Encrypted in the painting then is a double displacement: phantasmatically fulfilling the Oedipal wish to be at the same time lover and child of the desired (m)other. And it is yet another facet of Moraes’s incompleteness that his is a kind of perennially chastised Oedipality, for she is also ‘my Nemesis, my foe beyond the grave.’ A more contemporaneous Mother India is Indira Gandhi, who had identified herself with the nation; she has ‘lost the right to call herself a woman [...] has grown an invisible dick’ according to Philomina Zogoiby, who is engaged in a ‘struggle against the phallocracy’ in Rushdie’s mocking phrase (213). As opposed to the emblematic film, *Mother India*, Rushdie has his narrator reflect sardonically that

Nobody has ever made a movie called *Father India*. [...] ‘Mr. India’ however, perhaps the crudest of all such nationalistic formulations, that we did latterly get. [...] In this trashy extravaganza, as worthless in its gaudy colours as the old Nargis mother-vehicle was sombre and worthy, the producers did unintentionally provide us with an image of the National Father after all [...] Mogambo. His name, filched from the title of an old Ava Gardner vehicle, a forgettable piece of African hokum, is carefully chosen to avoid
offending any of the country’s communities; it’s neither Muslim nor Hindu, Parsi nor Christian, Jain nor Sikh, and if there’s an echo in it of the bongo-bongo Sanders-of-the-River caricatures inflicted by post-war Hollywood on the people of the ‘Dark Continent,’ well, that’s a brand of xenophobia unlikely to make many enemies in India today. (168)

That this is indeed part of the subtext of the Moor’s tale is emphasized in his closing comment that ‘in this junk drama [...] I see a lurid mirror-image of what was never, will never be a movie: the story of Abraham Zogoiby and myself’ (169).66

Conclusion

Moraes’s story offers little reason to hope for resolution. This is the meaning of the waning of the sphere of the individual that I posited at the outset of this article, and of the debilitation of both political and ethical agency, at least for the marginalized. The dark lesson of the novel is encapsulated only in the catastrophic destruction of the metropolis, where multiculturalism might have thrived. ‘Mogambo,’ the Moor’s father Abraham, sees the

66 One might speculate in this context that a film called Father India might have been made to complement Richard Attenborough’s not quite satisfactory treatment of the Father of the Nation in Gandhi. If Gandhi was indeed the National Father (‘Bapu’) then his declared wards, the Untouchables might well feel that their legacy in the new nation has been a bitter one, and they might well wish the symbolic death of the Father. After all the Untouchables had been mobilized by Gandhi in the fight against the former masters of the nation, and the leader of the Untouchables, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, was under no illusion that Gandhi would be a better ‘Father.’ In Midnight’s Children, Rushdie had already figured the transfer from colonial rule to postcolonial rule in an Oedipal relationship, with ‘Methwold sahib’ fathering the protagonist and child of midnight, Midnight’s Children (London: Picador, 1982), p.102. Rushdie is obsessed with thematizing the importance of the Oedipus complex for a postcolonial writer, for, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have emphasized, ‘Oedipus is always colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony [...] it is our intimate colonial education’ – an ‘analytic imperialism’ which gives meaning to Rushdie’s attempt to reflect the social in the personal, for colonialism is behind everything for Rushdie’s work, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking, 1983), p.23.

Let me hasten to add that Rushdie’s appropriation of Oedipus is entirely conventional – he does not pause to consider whether ethnicity is a complicating factor in the presumed universality of Oedipus. Jean Walton has more recently written on this issue, arguing that race has been underrepresented in psychoanalysis; she approvingly cites Bronislaw Malinowski’s criticism of the psychoanalytic assumption of the universality of the Oedipus complex, ‘Re-Placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse: Founding Narratives of Feminism.’ Critical Inquiry, 21 (1995), 775-804 (p.777).
situation clearly; no scales cover his eyes, whereas the son is a vacillating figure, tossed between dreams and hopes. Mogambo understands the meaning of Carmen da Gama’s dictum that ‘[t]he poor will never be as sneaky as the rich, so they will always lose in the end’ (200); he has come to the conclusion that the only response to the subordination of the marginalized under the heel of the ruling elite, those behind the four super-groups who controlled power within the ‘one and a half per cent of the country’s companies [who] owned over half of all private capital’ – the only satisfying response was to play the game by its own rules – by hook or crook, an eye for an eye (180-3). The Moor observes that Abraham-Mogambo’s success in this capacity was at best ‘a dark, ironic victory for India’s deep-rooted secularism. The very nature of [the] inter-community league of cynical self-interest gave the lie to Mainduck’s vision of a theocracy’ of Hindu majoritarianism over all the minorities (332). As Vasco had predicted, only corruption could ‘defeat fanaticism’ (332): this seems to be the novel’s pessimistic conclusion or motto.

This is not to say that the novel wallows in its pessimism. There is at least a negative ethics undergirding the novel, a representation of the injustices done to marginal figures. The time comes when the Moor can no longer participate in Mainduck’s new strategy of seeking coalition with the most extreme Hindu authoritarians – the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (337). This strategy was to ‘teach[...] minority groups a lesson [...] putting people in their place,’ a strategy, Zeeny Vakil points out, founded on the transformation of Hindu culture’s ‘many-headed beauty’ and ‘peace’ into ‘[a] single, martial deity, a single book, and mob rule’ (338). Rushdie also includes a squib, in this connection, against ‘Sir V. Naipaul’ who described the Hindu fundamentalists’ destruction of the Ayodhya mosque as their ‘awakening to history’ (363).

The Moor’s ‘tragedy,’ as he himself puts it in his most Shakespearean if not Sophoclean language, is the ‘tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by One’ (408); it is a record of a failed ideal of ethico-politically responsible pluralism. A parallel in another register appears in The Satanic Verses’s dramatization of an encounter with singularity, expressed in the mantra of the divine ‘One one one.’ In this article I have addressed the cross-dressing by which a middle-class novel appears to be credentialized as intimate with the tactics of militant and subversive minority activity – the subversion of power by power in a version of class struggle. It is also presented as attuned to minoritarian perspectives. What alternatives could a Moor marooned in ethnonationalist times have
done? I would not want to deny Moraes a modicum of dignity, even in his cry of ‘Foul!’ There is something tragic, almost, in the Moor’s demoralization, because it is he as the novel’s moral centre of gravity that enables us to reach the conclusion that the state has failed its minorities and its promise of liberal social democracy, something more particularly regrettable than the generalized loss of an old cosmopolitanism that was ushered in by Vasco da Gama in 1498. This is the kind of modulation Martha Nussbaum says Sophocles asks even for Philoctetes, whose pain is shown to retain some human dignity.\(^6^7\) And in India contemporary history does show evidence of the dignity retained by even those who we might expect to have reason to be demoralized. Appadurai points out that in fact ordinary people, even poor people, have in times of ethnic strife displayed ‘extraordinary courage [...] to shelter their friends and neighbours from ethnocidal mob violence.’ Rightly seeing in such acts a different vision of Bombay, a cosmopolitan hope, Appadurai concludes that ‘[t]hese utopian visions and critical practices are resolutely modernist in their visions of equity, justice, and cultural cosmopolitanism.’\(^6^8\)

The categories of ethos, ethnos and ethics collide powerfully in this narrative of ressentiment and de-moralization, requiring us to ask not only where the moral centre of the book lies but also what are the intersections between the discourse of ethics and the discourse of ethnicity and ethnic identification. It should give us pause that the protagonist presents his own victimhood – his ethos – as an ethically questionable rationalization of his identification with the category of the ethnicized subaltern (ethnos) and as a justification for his joining in communalist violence against other ethnic minorities while at the same time opportunistically availing himself of his family’s influence to escape to another country when things begin to heat up at ‘home.’ In retailing the self-destructive furies of Moraes’s de-moralization, the novel powerfully crystallizes the defeat of the highest ideals of secular liberal pluralism. A middle-class sensibility permeates the Moor’s minoritarian narrative (he is only one marginalized figure after all and, coming from a fairly well-off background not a representative instance in any case), so that the question remains, what exactly are the ethics and the politics of the novelist, beyond the safe liberal plea for pluralism and even beyond the catabolic ressentiment he expresses? It is ultimately insufficient to raise this question only with regard to his protagonist. Does the novel


\(^{68}\) Appadurai, p.650.
betray ultimately a bourgeois intelligence that is seeking to insinuate itself into the class position of a subaltern consciousness? Or to reformulate a motivating question of this article, is this not a case of subaltern envy transmuted into a de-moralized ressentiment?

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Postethnicity and Postcommunism in Hanif Kureishi’s
*Gabriel’s Gift* and Salman Rushdie’s *Fury*

Mita Banerjee

Abstract

This article argues that the events of September 11, 2001 may lead us to fundamentally rethink some of the key tenets of postcolonial theory, most notably the concept of hybridity. In light of this (political and theoretical) necessity of critical revision, it is all the more striking that (erstwhile) postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi have their fictional protagonists – in their most recent novels *Fury* and *Gabriel’s Gift*, respectively – go mainstream and hence postethnic, while they discover a new kind of cultural exoticism: the off-white allure of postcommunist subjects.

Introduction

September 11, this essay sets out to argue, could well be considered not only the ground zero of American literature and the American nation, but also the ground zero of the very paradigm of postcolonial studies. What is interesting to me is that the fault-finding, today, not only of the US after September 11, but of an entire Western world in the wake of recent terrorist attacks in London, is centered on the idea of hybridity. Yet, this hybridity remains curiously aporetic in the current political and journalistic discourse. For the emphasis of the coverage of the recent terrorist attacks in Britain lies in the paradox between the fact of lived hybridity and the logic of religious fundamentalism. How can hybridity and fundamentalism be united in one and the same person? The current emphasis hence lies in what hybridity may conceal; and on the idea that de-facto hybridity is no longer a safeguard against fundamentalism.

In the media coverage of current global terrorism there is a constant oscillation between the deep-structure of terrorism and its surface. Hybridity, disturbingly enough, is seen as a camouflage. Thus, in Germany, even the liberal newspaper *Die Zeit* engages in a certain populist rhetoric: ‘Could this [the recent terrorist attacks in London] have happened in Germany’?¹ Hybridity, for this article engaged simultaneously in fault-finding and in predicting the future impact of terrorism on Germany, is a mere disguise –

the fact of cultural adulteration or apparent assimilation which conceals the deep-structure of religious fundamentalism. What is even more disturbing is in that the Zeit-coverage of political prophecy, this deep structure is directly related to the face, and hence the race, of the political assailant. I am disturbed by how the randomness of choice – the Zeit’s leafing through the files of previous fundamentalist terrorists to extrapolate a logic of religious fundamentalism converges with the politics of the mug shot: the logic of a brown face whose stoic expression veils its terrorist sentiments. There is a triple move in the use of this mug shot of Nizar Trabelsi, a man, the article suggests, whose alienation from German society caused him to venerate Osama bin Laden and to plan a terrorist attack which was then detected before it could be executed. The mug shot, as Amitava Kumar has argued, has traditionally centered on the self-evidentness of race: a brown face is said to index cultural difference, even incompatibility. It is this visible incompatibility, in turn, which makes the mug shot akin to the passport photograph. As Kumar describes, the politics of immigration – the immigration officer’s reading the immigrant’s passport as if it were a book – have traditionally been defined by a matching of the picture’s racial unfamiliarity with the unfamiliarity of the immigrant’s background:

The officer reads the name of the new arrival’s place of birth. He has never heard of it. The immigrant has spent all of the thirty-one years of his life in that village. This difference in itself is quite ordinary. But for some reason that he does not understand, the immigrant is filled with shame.²

What is significant about contemporary terrorism, however, is that there no longer is a match between the passport photograph and the place of birth. The photograph’s difference, if still unfamiliar, is contradicted by the familiarity of birthplace: London, New York, Berlin. As the Zeit article describes the perpetrators of the recent terrorist attacks in London:

Their names were in no terrorist file. Almost all of them were strangers to British intelligence. Not even their parents suspected that their sons were developing into suicide bombers. This new phenomenon of homemade terrorists living in the West is now also worrying German security experts. [...] More and more immigrants of the third and fourth generation, who perhaps have never even set foot in their parents’ country of origin, have dedicated themselves to a metaphysical patriotism, to the sense of belonging to an imagined Muslim community [...].³

The passport has thus become harder, even impossible to read. The issue may no longer be a forged passport but the gap between biography and passport

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³ Kumar, p.5.
photograph. As the Zeit article goes on to wonder, ‘Nizar Trabelsi comes to Germany at 19, as a promising young player for the soccer team Fortuna Düsseldorf. Twelve years later, he wants to blow himself up in front of US military barracks.’ Which, then, is the true camouflage, the face or the biography? Does the face imply what the biography dissolves – the logic of cultural incompatibility – or does the seeming cultural assimilation conceal the truth to which the face testifies, the insurmountable fact of a difference which is not only racial but cultural? The idea of the cultural logic of the mug shot is hence itself a paradox in which the racial and the cultural blur into a single suspicion: the potentiality of terrorism.

Hybridity has thus come home with a vengeance, and it has come home as something it is not. If hybridity is only a surface phenomenon, it can clearly be no safeguard against religious fundamentalism. It is in this sense that September 11 has indeed become the ground zero of postcolonial studies, a field whose be-all and end-all has been precisely the now vexed notion of hybridity. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin wrote in the volume which in 1989 inaugurated the canonization of postcolonial studies, The Empire Writes Back, ‘[b]oth literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognize cross-culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group “purity.”’

Hybridity, for the inception of postcolonial studies, struck the celebratory note of cultural adulteration, a messiness of culture from which nothing could be exempt. Hybridity, then, could be considered as postcolonial studies’ sublime, its ultimate antidote to cultural purism. What happens to the epistemological if it is suddenly disproved – or seems to be disproved – by the political, the actual? At the very moment of such disproval, I want to suggest in the following, postcolonial literature discards the very premises on which it was once founded. It jettisons postcolonial identity and the history that has defined it; it jeers at political correctness; and it is busy manufacturing mug shots of its own of potential Muslim terrorists.

The Mug Shot of the Postcolonial

If the mug shot – in the factuality of its presence – has become the overarching paradigm of the present, what is the role of postcolonial fiction in this climate of political uncertainty and the need for documentation? Significantly, at the very moment of political surveillance, the protagonist of

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postcolonial fiction has become, not just a moving target, but a white person. At a historical juncture in which racial difference has become suspect with renewed political force, the postcolonial subject rediscovers himself as white. Ironically, this is a cultural constellation in which the mug shot is politically safe for postcolonial studies because the face of the postcolonial subject/suspect turns out to be white. In his recent novel, *Fury*, Salman Rushdie evades the mug shot by concealing the face of his fictional protagonist. Postcolonial identity is not in the face, but the hat: ‘The coat of his linen suit weighed heavily, damply, on his shoulders, yet in the name of rectitude, of how things should be done, he kept it on; also his straw Panama hat.’5 As Kumar has argued, there is a fine line between the mug shot and the passport photograph:

If it can be allowed that the passport is a kind of book, then the immigration officer, holding a passport in his hand, is also a reader. [...] Under the fluorescent lights, he reads the entries made in an unfamiliar hand under categories that are all too familiar. He examines the seals, the stamps, and the signatures on them. He looks up. He reads the immigrant’s responses to his questions, the clothes, the accent. [...] Suddenly he turns around and tries to catch a colleague’s eye. It is nothing, he wants more coffee. You notice all this if you are an immigrant. (F 3)

If the passport, as Kumar suggests, is a kind of book, then, as no other than Rushdie has once written, ‘the book is a kind of passport.’6 In an age where passports contain biometrical data and the passport photograph as potential mug shot has become more suspicious than ever, what does it mean that no other than Rushdie should turn his book, *Fury*, into a passport which contains only the image of a white face?

What is the logic of the moving target, of evading the mug shot, at this moment, not just in the history of postcolonial studies, but in world history? Where in *Fury*, the whiteness of the postcolonial protagonist is not so much in the face than it is in the hat (a hat which conceals what could be a white face), the whiteness of the youthful protagonist of Hanif Kureishi’s novel, *Gabriel’s Gift*, is unqualified, unquestionable: ‘Despite his normalcy, or because of it, Gabriel was sent on errands to flats, squats and street corners, delivering packages that he hid in his underwear and shoes. Being a “tiddler,” and young and white [...] he was less likely to be stopped by the police.’7 ‘Whiteness’ and ‘normalcy’ are thus synonymous; and this convergence takes place, not in mainstream fiction, but in a postcolonial narrative.

6 Kumar, p.2.
I am interested, then, in a historical coincidence which is both political and fictional. Both Rushdie’s novel *Fury* and Kureishi’s recent narrative *Gabriel’s Gift* were published in 2001, in the wake of September 11. My argument is thus informed by a logical impossibility. Even as, due to the time lag of the publication process, these two novels cannot be literal reactions to September 11, they nevertheless react to a political climate out of which September 11 arose. As Rushdie himself has put it: ‘[The sense of change was] one of the reasons I felt such a sense of urgency about getting it down: I had a sense that this wasn’t going to last long. *This bubble is going to burst.* Obviously I didn’t foresee calamity, but I did see that these moments in a city, or in a society, are usually pretty brief; this sense of infinite possibility doesn’t go on. People fall back to earth. That’s I think what drove me to write this book with such urgency that it actually interrupted another book and took precedence. In retrospect, it was as if I was driven by some kind of prescience or foreknowledge which, of course, I wasn’t. But what I did think is exactly what you say: that the world is going to change fast, and if I want to capture *this* moment, I better do it fast because any second now it isn’t going to be here to capture. I think September 11 in a way underlined and dramatized that change, but you’re right: the change was happening anyway’ (Willard Manus, ‘A Talk with Salman Rushdie’, *Lively Arts: An Internet Cultural Magazine* - Books - Features (Nov./Dec. 2002). Accessed 14 May 2006. <http://www.lively-arts.com/books/0211/salman_rushdie.htm>. Emphasis original.

For how else could these two texts not predict September 11 itself but the reactions to it? The desire for whiteness around which both *Fury* and *Gabriel’s Gift* revolve seems to be an end point of a long development of cultural self-reflexivity or postcolonial fatigue in postcolonial studies. As early as 1985, Kureishi castigated a literary and market imperative which condemned the postcolonial writer to churning out ever-new reworkings of the postcolonial. As Kureishi has one of his characters say in *My Beautiful Launderette*: ‘We are professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis.’ *Gabriel’s Gift*, like *Intimacy* (1998) before it, is the logical consequence of this very rebellion against the parameters of the postcolonial. In this recent novel, Kureishi proclaims the fact he is not a professional postcolonial, but a professional writer *tout court*.

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8 As Rushdie himself has put it: ‘[The sense of change was] one of the reasons I felt such a sense of urgency about getting it down: I had a sense that this wasn’t going to last long. *This bubble is going to burst.* Obviously I didn’t foresee calamity, but I did see that these moments in a city, or in a society, are usually pretty brief; this sense of infinite possibility doesn’t go on. People fall back to earth. That’s I think what drove me to write this book with such urgency that it actually interrupted another book and took precedence. In retrospect, it was as if I was driven by some kind of prescience or foreknowledge which, of course, I wasn’t. But what I did think is exactly what you say: that the world is going to change fast, and if I want to capture *this* moment, I better do it fast because any second now it isn’t going to be here to capture. I think September 11 in a way underlined and dramatized that change, but you’re right: the change was happening anyway’ (Willard Manus, ‘A Talk with Salman Rushdie’, *Lively Arts: An Internet Cultural Magazine* - Books - Features (Nov./Dec. 2002). Accessed 14 May 2006. <http://www.lively-arts.com/books/0211/salman_rushdie.htm>. Emphasis original.

postethnic postcolonial emerges as white. Second, there is a renewed interest, on the part of this postcolonial white gaze, in an ethnicity that has not yet been co-opted by the parameters of the field of postcoloniality. Ethnicity is still desirable as a space outside the postcolonial.

Interestingly, the preoccupation in these two texts with a new, unpostcolonial kind of ethnicity takes the shape of a fascination with Eastern Europeanness. In both cases, if to a different extent, a quasi-white (in Rushdie’s case) and a simply white (in Kureishi’s narrative) post-postcolonial protagonist gazes at an Eastern European face. Even as in Rushdie’s novel, this Eastern European difference is fascinating whereas it is repelling in *Gabriel’s Gift*, the preoccupation remains. What is even more striking is that the fascination of Eastern Europeanness is both cultural and visible. Eastern Europeanness verges on the racial difference of an off-whiteness. As Rushdie’s protagonist Malik Solanka, whose name reveals the stubborn vestiges of his erstwhile postcoloniality, observes: ‘There was a tall, green-eyed young woman with steeply slanting Central European cheekbones who particularly caught his sexually abstinent but still roving eye’ (*F 4*).

The difference of this Eastern European woman, Mila Milo (her last name being the short Americanized version of Milosevic), is thus almost but not quite a racial one. Mila’s is truly, to use Matthew Frye Jacobson’s terms, a ‘whiteness of a different color’; yet, unlike Jacobson, Rushdie is not interested in mainstreaming her. Rather, the fascination with Mila’s ‘Eastern European cheekbones’ suggests that this different whiteness must be retained as a new ethnicity in its own right. Interestingly, the allure of ‘whiteness studies’ may thus also have gripped postcolonial studies. And yet, Thadious M. Davis’s cautionary reminder about the nature of such whiteness studies could also well be addressed to Rushdie’s and Kureishi’s narratives. At its best, whiteness studies destroys the social privilege of whiteness, its presumed transparency, and goes on to ‘ethnicize’ whiteness by pointing out that whiteness too has a history of its own (and a highly contestable one at that). At its worst, however, whiteness studies is a response to the perception of white marginalization in a public space which is said to be increasingly

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10 Matthew Frye Jacobson’s study *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) addresses both the contested nature of ‘whiteness’ in US social and cultural history, and its relationship to the idea of ‘mainstreaming’ or, rather, of being ‘mainstreamed’: ‘The saga of European immigration has long been held up as proof of the openness of American society. [...] But this pretty story suddenly fades once one recognizes how crucial Europeans’ racial status as “free white persons” was to their gaining entrance in the first place; how profoundly dependent their racial inclusion was upon the racial exclusion of others; [...] and how completely intertwined were the prospects of becoming American and becoming Caucasian’ (p.12).
dominated by multiculturalism. What, then, is the stake of postcolonial studies in this white terrain?

At a time when the space of the ‘post-postcolonial’ has been vacated in these postcolonial texts, difference – as the ethnicity of an off-whiteness – has not quite disappeared. Rather, the postcommunist takes the place of ethnicity; the postcommunist is the new ethnic. Crucially, however, even as the postcommunist comes to occupy the place of ethnicity within the framework of the postcolonial, there is no sense of a shared history or historical kinship between the ex-postcolonial and the postcommunist. What, then, is the function of the postcommunist for the ex-postcolonial? In *Fury*, the postcolonial has succumbed to a fundamental weariness of the self: ‘When he got home [...], Professor Solanka was seized by melancholy, his usual secret sadness, which he sublimated into the public sphere. Something was amiss in the world’ (*F* 7). It is in the sense of this fatigue that the postcolonial subject has to be resuscitated by Eastern Europeanness:

He understood that she had made him one of her projects. Mila’s special thing turned out to be the collection and repair of damaged people. [...] Mila would sit by his chair and press his feet while he delivered himself of the wisdom of the great sages of the world; and after a little time at his feet, she might move up to his aching lap. (*F* 117-25).

If sexual abstinence is the world weariness of the postcolonial, desire – and, by implication, postcolonial fiction –, is rekindled by a different kind of

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11 While Davis retraces the merits of ‘whiteness studies’ at the time of its emergence, she is also critical of its future. I believe that her point is especially well taken with regard to the idea that, being tired or frightened of having no ‘ethnic’ identity in the era of multiculturalism (see, for instance, Ruth Frankenberg’s study of the responses of white women to issues of ‘racial’ identity in her *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994], p.1), proponents of whiteness studies may eventually advocate the study of whiteness in its own right. In this sense, an entire history in which (before the emergence of Ethnic Studies) we have only been subjected to discussions of whiteness would be glossed over in the appeal to the ‘happy’ moment when we can finally, ‘safely’ talk about whiteness again. The distinction here seems to be between whiteness studies as a deconstructive practice and as a field based on what Ian Haney López has called a ‘positive (laudatory) White identity’ in his *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p.172. As Davis writes, “[t]he periodical *Race Traitor*, founded by Noel Ignatiev, whose research for *How the Irish Became White* helped initiate “white studies,” attempts to foster a widespread rejection of white privilege and encourages activist racial stances under the watchword “Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.” However, the periodical is not unproblematical in the work that Ignatiev terms “New Abolitionist”; *Race Traitor* has published interviews with neo-Nazis and projected that white militias can become allies in overturning the race system. Yet Ignatiev has worried over the potential for whiteness studies to become apolitical, narcissistic, and nationalistic [...],’ Thadious M. Davis, ‘Race Cards: Trumping and Troping in Constructing Whiteness’, in *Faulkner at 100: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. by Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp.165-79 (p.177).
ethnicity: the tantalizing off-whiteness of Eastern Europeanness. At a time when postcolonial studies has wearied of its own paradigm (when Pakistanis are fed up with a market that seeks to turn them into professional Pakistanis), postcolonial studies discovers Eastern Europeanness as a new, desirable ethnicity. This ethnicity may be desirable, what is more, because it falls outside the ‘ethno-racial pentagon’ of both US racial discourse and postcolonial studies. Precisely because Eastern Europeanness is no race proper, it is so alluring for postcolonial studies’ quest for a new, unco-opted difference. Crucially, however, this desire for an unco-opted space has far-reaching consequences for post-postcolonial literature. For Eastern Europeanness to remain a new ethnicity, there can be no sense of a shared history in these post-postcolonial texts. In order for Eastern Europeanness to remain unco-opted, the postcommunist cannot be the new postcolonial. Sadly enough, especially in Gabriel’s Gift, this distinction between the postcommunist and the postcolonial leads to a portrait of ‘ethnicity’ which could not have been more stereotypical. In its portrayal of Eastern Europeanness, postcolonial fiction depicts ethnicity as it was depicted prior to the emergence of postcolonial literature. In its picture of Eastern Europeanness, post-postcolonial literature is pre-postcolonial; it is stereotypical. Kureishi’s narrative portrays Eastern Europeanness through the figure of Hannah, a middle-aged au pair, as seen through the eyes of her fourteen-year-old protégée, Gabriel:

Hannah was, as far as Gabriel was able to make out, from a town called Bronchitis, with a winding river called Influenza running through it. She had been recommended to them by a friend, or perhaps the person was secretly their enemy. Whatever the situation, when Hannah came to them with her Eastern European clothes and cardboard suitcase, she had nowhere else to live. (G 9)

Eastern Europeanness, in Gabriel’s Gift, is the essence of postcommunist depravity. Hannah is starved both culturally and literally; apart from being a television addict, Hannah is literally engaged in ‘eating culture’:

Hannah, whose only qualification with children was the possibility that she might once have been a child herself, at least new how to eat. [...] Hannah could eat for England; she saw any amount of food in front of her as a challenge [...]. Once, Gabriel found her squeezing a tube of tomato puree down her throat. (G 9-10)

In Gabriel’s Gift, the Eastern European reappears as the un- or precivilized. What this implies, ironically, is that in this set up, the postcolonial figures as the new norm; within this framework of post-postcolonial studies as the new enlightenment, Eastern Europe has become the other of a now civilized postcolonial world. Disturbingly, not only is the history of colonization thus
reconfigured as a civilizing process, but Kipling’s burden of the civilizing mission has now been transmitted to the erstwhile colonial itself.

If in *Fury*, Eastern Europeanness is the new erotic of the postcolonial, it is the new exotic of *Gabriel’s Gift*. In Kureishi’s novel, the protagonist’s white gaze dwells on a body whose repulsiveness verges on that of racial difference: ‘After a few minutes he noticed an unusual smell. He went to the door to see if Hannah was standing outside the room, as she was a person around whom different odours seemed to congregate, like bums on a street corner’ (*G* 18). There is a linguistic slippage here which characterizes the text’s vision of Eastern Europeanness. For even if the narrative insists on the difference between odours congregating around Hannah ‘like bums on a street corner’ and the idea that Hannah herself smells like a bum on a street corner, its insistence on Hannah’s physical repulsiveness renders such a distinction trifling.

In both *Fury* and *Gabriel’s Gift*, I would argue, the appearance of the Eastern European spells out a preoccupation by postcolonial fiction with itself and its being on the verge towards ‘postethnicity.’ Hannah’s physical repulsiveness is matched by her dim-wittedness, her cultural illiteracy, as well as her sheer linguistic incompetence:

Hannah looked straight ahead, as if she were walking in a cupboard. She understood little English and when Gabriel spoke to her she grimaced and frowned like someone trying to swallow an ashtray. Perhaps they were both amazed that a kid spoke better English than she did. (*G* 2)

If the postcommunist is the new ethnic, then, the post-postcolonial gaze of Kureishi’s protagonist is clearly a colonial, not a postcolonial one. There is no sense here of the groundbreaking idea, formulated at the inception of postcolonial studies, that the new paradigm must be founded on the abrogation of the colonizer’s language. What was once celebrated, by Rushdie and Kureishi alike, as the exuberant turning of the colonizer’s language into one’s own has now been turned into the debatably enjoyable act of swallowing an ashtray.

**Postcoloniality after Auschwitz**

In much the same way, the Eastern European is not only offensive to the postcolonial’s sense of smell, but she is also visibly obtrusive. Even as *Gabriel’s Gift* revolves around a white gaze surveilling Eastern European physicality and difference, this gaze is denied by the narrative itself. Instead, the perpetrator of the white gaze is annoyed at what the narrative perceives as
the impertinent gaze of Eastern Europeanness. There is a strange logic of looking at the heart of *Gabriel’s Gift*:

She did watch him; and he watched her watching him. Hannah had a queer look, for her eyes, instead of focusing on the same point in the normal way, pointed in different directions. He wondered if she might be able to watch two television programmes simultaneously, on different channels, on each side of the room. (*G* 11)

What is so disturbing is that a gaze that may be accounted for by the constant threat of deportation by the white/post-postcolonial subject is now turned into an impertinent surveillance of whiteness on the part of the Eastern European. This is a bizarre politics of looking which culminates in a question asked by Gabriel’s father: ‘What was her last job, turning on the gas at Auschwitz?’ (*G* 34).

Crucially, in both *Fury* and *Gabriel’s Gift*, the desire for postethnicity on the part of the postcolonial seems to coincide with a fatigue of political correctness. Political correctness, it might be argued, may in fact parallel the postcolonial author’s condemnation to repeating the plight of his own postcolonial subjectivity. This political correctness which is implied by both narratives to be a form of discourse terrorism is dismissed, in both cases, by the laughing off of Auschwitz. Why, then, should the Shoah appear in both narratives, and why should it be accompanied with the weary shrug of obsolescence? Disturbingly enough, the desire, in these postcolonial texts, for the solace of postethnicity takes the form of ridicule. The narratives caricature those who, for historical reasons, cannot shed their own ethnicity. Even more disturbingly, there is a bizarre implication in this impatience of the post-postcolonial of those who are not yet postethnic: if the trauma of postcoloniality can be, first overcome through the exuberance of postcolonial fiction, and then in its turn posted in favour of a subjectivity which is no longer ethnically marked, why cannot the memory of the Holocaust be similarly dismissed? Rushdie’s protagonist, Malik Solanka, is fed up with listening to his German Jewish plumber, Schlink:

This was a Jewish plumber who had escaped the death camps by going underwater. His skills as a plumber meant the crew had protected him. [...] Schlink had told the story a thousand times before, a thousand thousand. Out it came in its set phrases and cadences. [...] ‘You should write this down and register it,’ [Solanka] told Schlink. [...] ‘It’s, as they say, high-concept. *U-571* meets *Schindler’s List*. [...] Call it *Jewboat.*’ Schlink stiffened; and [...] turned on Solanka his mournful, disgusted gaze. (*F* 48)

The fatigue of postcolonial literature with the concept of ‘ethnicity’ hence also entails a fatigue with political correctness. The Shoah itself, in the wake of such postcolonial malaise with its own patterns, becomes a mere ‘tale.’ Ethnicity, as well as the historical trauma of the Holocaust, has thus become
annoying in its ‘set phrases and cadences.’ It is at this juncture that Eastern Europeanness emerges as the more alluring ethnicity precisely because there are as yet no fixed cadences and phrases in which its story could be told.

Even as Gabriel’s Gift ridicules Auschwitz through its guards having been metamorphosed into an Eastern European au pair and Fury laughs at a Holocaust survivor who proves unable to shed his memories or his accent, the attack on political correctness remains and may render this distinction irrelevant. The posting of the postcolonial, in Fury as much as in Gabriel’s Gift, coincides with the posting of political correctness. As we enter a new millennium, postcolonial fiction seems to have become weary and wary not only of its own paradigm, but also of the verities this paradigm has historically been accompanied by. If hybridity has become suspect in the wake of events which proved that it is by no means a safeguard against fundamentalism, so has become political correctness.

The Brave New World of Postcolonial Studies

What is so disturbing is that in both Fury and Gabriel’s Gift, the postcolonial moves through a world in which he, having successfully abrogated or mastered the English language, is exasperated at not being understood in a multiethnic metropolis of whose his own presence is no longer symptomatic. Incidentally, the postcolonial’s own linguistic competence functions as a marker of his own whiteness, his invisibility as he moves through a Western metropolis in which he is no longer, to use Homi K. Bhabha’s famous formulation, unhomed.12 The postcolonial subject has thus successfully shed his own ethnicity and is now annoyed at the ethnics whom he is surrounded by. As Gabriel’s Gift puts it:

The city was no longer home to immigrants only from the former colonies, plus a few others: every race was present, living side by side [...]. It held together, this new international city called London – just about – without being unnecessarily anarchic or corrupt. There was, however, little chance of being understood in any shop. Dad once said, ‘The last time I visited the barber’s I came out with a bowl of couscous, half a gram of Charlie and a number two crop. I only went in for a shave!’ (G 8)

There is an intricate and double-edged invocation of colonialism in this passage. The postcolonial narrative laments the fact that the Western metropolis is ‘no longer home to immigrants only from the former colonies’ but that it has also become home for those whose difference is an eyesore or rather, an earsore, for the postcolonial subject who has been successfully

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mainstreamed. In this brave new world of postcolonial studies, it is the postcolonial who evokes the rather conservative idea of multiethnic spaces as the cities of Babel. What is annoying to the postcolonial is that those immigrants who do not come from ‘former colonies,’ for the very fact that in their case, the official language has not been English, fail to learn the language. There is no sense in Kureishi’s text, ironically, of the fact that Britain was not the only colonial power, and that those whose staple diet is couscous would speak French, not English. (British) colonialism is hence reconfigured as a civilizing process. What is so disturbing is that not only does the postcolonial subject rediscover itself as white, but that it has successfully adopted a white gaze as well as a white ear.

I believe that the fact that this passage from Gabriel’s Gift should find its exact mirror image in Fury cannot be mere coincidence. Rather, it may speak of a historical moment in the development of postcolonial literature itself. In Fury, the protagonist Malik Solanka celebrates his affinity, if not racial identity, with Europeanness, by entering a Viennese coffee house. He, like Gabriel’s father, is indignant at not being understood by those who, unlike the postcolonial subject, have failed to assimilate:

Approaching the counter with its refrigerated display of the great cakes of Austria, he passed over the excellent-looking Sacher gateau and asked, instead, for a piece of Linzertorte, receiving in response a look of perfect Hispanic incomprehension, which obliged him exasperatedly to point. Then finally he was able to sip and read. (F 44)

The ‘Hispanic incomprehension’ which Solanka is met with, then, is the very reason why Gabriel’s father is given a bowl of food rather than a bowl cut. In this brave new world of postcolonial studies, then, the erstwhile postcolonial protagonist laments the multiculturalism of the Western metropolis. The brave new world of postcolonial studies may hence simply be the brave old world of the Western mainstream.

Postcoloniality after September 11

At a time when it seems imperative to redefine the postcolonial and where the postcolonial has become reconfigured, in the political sphere, as deceiving in its hybridity, postcolonial texts seem to opt out of this discussion. They may even, as in Rushdie’s case, engage in producing mug shots of those who are still preoccupied with their own ethnicity:

‘Islam will cleanse this street of godless motherfucker bad drivers,’ the taxi driver screamed at a rival motorist. [...] Malik Solanka, listening in to the explosive, village-accented Urdu, was briefly distracted from his own inner turmoil by the driver’s venom.
ALI MAJNU, said the card. Majnu meant beloved. [...] Beloved Ali was Indian or Pakistani, but, no doubt of some misguided collectivist spirit of paranoiac pan-Islamic solidarity, he blamed all New York road users for the tribulations of the Muslim world. (F 66; emphasis original)

The foil against which the desirable face of the Eastern European ‘new ethnic’ is presented in Fury, is that of stubborn ‘old’ ethnicity; an ethnicity which is potentially terrorist.

The paradox of September 11, in recent postcolonial fiction, is that after the terrorist attacks, the world behind the former iron curtain seems to have become politically safe. Uncannily, Fury and Gabriel’s Gift seem to suggest that after September 11, it may no longer be safe to be postcolonial, but it is safe – even intriguing – to be postcommunist. As the postcolonial subject evades the mug shot by becoming white, ethnicity has thus not altogether disappeared but it has become differently configured. In these Eastern European characters, there may be hybridity (as in the case of Mila Milo) but there is no fundamentalism. As in Gabriel’s Gift, there may be a stubborn, unappealing ethnicity, but its terrorism is confined to refusing to switch channels. If hybridity is the ground zero of postcolonial literature, Fury and Gabriel’s Gift significantly revise the relevance of this concept for postcolonial studies. They evade the mug shot of the postcolonial by featuring white protagonists. The mug shot of Ali Majnu, in Fury, pictures the Pakistani not as a Pakistani American, but as victim and perpetrator of pan-Islamic road rage. Eastern Europeanness, in both Fury and Gabriel’s Gift, provides a welcome contrast to Ali Majnu: There are no set phrases and cadences with which to describe it, and it is hence sufficiently postethnic to be intriguing. At the beginning of a new millennium, postcolonial literature is in the grip of a desire for whiteness, a desire suffused with a tinge of (post)ethnicity whose story has not yet been told.

At the beginning of this new millennium, postcolonial literature has thus decidedly taken a conservative turn. This conservative turn, at the same time, can be seen as a redrawing on the boundaries of the nation. Rushdie’s ‘Hispanic incomprehension’ and Kureishi’s barber shop story converge in a recentering of the postcolonial subject in a nation which must consolidate its borders. This rhetoric of national reconsolidation, in turn, historically coincides with a moment in which even hitherto leftist politicians have turned the new conservatives. In Germany, former member of the Green party and now minister of the interior, Otto Schily, has by now famously declared that the boat of the German nation is full. Postcolonial literature hence converges with post-leftist politics. Could the Rushdie of the new millennium be called the Tony Blair of postcolonial studies?

To return to Nizar Trabelsi, who came to Germany from a Tunisian village because he wanted to play soccer, I am interested in the way in which
the mug shot is a dead end: a face, and not just a brown face, reveals only itself. What may be much more important to consider than either the face or the biography may be the fact that German society did not have the frameworks or intercultural competence to make Trabelsi feel that he belonged. As the Zeit laconically puts it, ‘Trabelsi [could] not cope with the drill and the discipline of German professionals.’ Where the article tritely suggests that a German sense of order (temporal and otherwise) and the Tunisian way of life do not mix and that the consequence of attempting such a mixture could well be terrorism, what if the soccer team of Fortuna Düsseldorf had tried to come up with an intercultural synthesis which could have matched the rhythms – cultural and personal – of its players? What if, instead of a mug shot of Trabelsi, the article had featured a mug shot of the team’s coach? The mug shot, I would suggest, needs to be one of the host society as much as of the terrorist assailants. I believe that it is no coincidence that there have recently been calls, within frameworks such as ethnic studies, to explore the paradigm of hospitality as a critical new avenue for theoretical thinking. Rather than evade the mug shot at a time when once again we expect it to show a brown face, postcolonial fiction as an alternative discourse on the present could hence engage in mug shotting contemporary Western societies.

It is at this point that I would like to return to Kumar’s vision of books and passports: if the book is indeed a kind of a passport, then no paradigm would be better suited than postcolonial studies to provide answers in the contemporary world to questions which are becoming increasingly more complex. If the book is their passport, why should postcolonial writers, today of all times, show the immigration officer a white face? Where Fury and Gabriel’s Gift are busy manufacturing their own mug shots of the difference surrounding them while their protagonists are busy evading the camera, what may be at issue may in fact be an engagement with history, an engagement which once led to the inception of postcolonial studies in the first place.

What would be much more interesting to consider would be the different forms of postcoloniality which links, say, Indian postcoloniality and Eastern European postcommunism. To say that someone is from a place called ‘Bronchitis’ clearly does not help here. If Rushdie and Kureishi put Eastern Europeanness on the map of postcolonial studies, if unwittingly and disguised as either postethnic or ridiculous, what would be much more interesting would be, as in the work of Marcel Cornis-Pope, to consider Eastern European as a postcolonial space in its own right. If a host of

13 Bittner, on-line.
14 In this sense, I see Cornis-Pope’s reference to the work of Bhabha as more than accidental: ‘My own interest is in mapping the “Imaginary Ethnographies” of East Central Europe which, to
postcolonial critics have objected to postcolonial studies’ lack of historical differentiation by emphasizing the historical differences between various kinds of colonialism, \(^{15}\) this need for differentiation may well be renewed by the appearance of Eastern Europeanness on the map of Western (including postcolonial) imagination. Rather than arguing that postcommunist characters are postcolonial at a time when the postcolonial protagonist himself has vacated the place of postcoloniality, what may be intriguing may be less the allure of Eastern European cheekbones than the intersections, and differences, between colonialism and communism as systems of social, cultural and economic domination. Where Cornis-Pope has explored the framework of postmodernism to account for postsocialist frames of mind, Rushdie and Kureishi may unwittingly suggest that such a dialogue may also be fruitful for postcolonial studies. If Rushdie suggests that the weary postcolonial author is resuscitated by the new inquisitiveness of the Eastern European subject, perhaps such a dialogue would turn postcolonialism’s own ground zero into a fruitful endeavor.

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my mind, have often been more responsive than political discourses to a multifaceted cultural landscape punctuated by “minority discourses” and the “instantaneous and subaltern voice of the people,”’ Cornis-Pope, ‘Literary Imagination in the Post-Cold War Era: Developing Alternative Models of Cultural Interaction’, *Literary Research/Recherche littéraire*, 18.36 (2001), 389-401 (p.392). While Cornis-Pope himself is interested in an experience of ‘postmodern’ or fragmented subjectivity which, after the end of the cold war, first and second worlds have come to share, an idea which causes him to link postcommunist writers such as Sorin Titel to Thomas Pynchon (Cornis-Pope, pp.396-8), I believe that Rushdie’s evocation of some sense of ‘kinship’ (a kinship which *Fury* goes on to reduce to sexual allure) between ‘postcoloniality’ and ‘postcommunism’ would also enable us to explore this intersection in (multiply) postcolonial terms.

\(^{15}\) The tension here seems to be between, on the one hand, the historical specificity of colonialist regimes, and, on the other, the idea of colonialism as a method of both material and discursive subjugation of colonized peoples. As Ania Loomba has put it in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998): ‘Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history’ (p.2).


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