

2010

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Recommended Citation

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http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/314

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Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid

Haj Yazdiha

The contemporary cultural landscape is an amalgam of cross-cultural influences, blended, patch-worked, and layered upon one another. Unbound and fluid, culture is hybrid and interstitial, moving between spaces of meaning. The notion of cultural hybridity has existed far before it was popularized in postcolonial theory as culture arising out of interactions between “colonizers” and “the colonized”. However, in this time after imperialism, globalization has both expanded the reach of Western culture, as well as allowed a process by which the West constantly interacts with the East, appropriating cultures for its own means and continually shifting its own signifiers of dominant culture. This hybridity is woven into every corner of society, from trendy fusion cuisine to Caribbean rhythms in pop music to the hyphenated identities that signify ethnic Americans, illuminating the lived experience of ties to a dominant culture blending with the cultural codes of a Third World culture.

Considerations of hybridity run the gamut from existential to material, political to economic, yet this discussion will not be able to tease out the extensive implications of each consideration. Rather, this discussion aims to explore the notion of hybridity theoretically, synthesizing the vast body of literature to critique essentialist notions of identity as fixed and constant. I will offer three ways in which hybridity might serve as a tool for deconstructing the rigid labels that maintain social inequities through exclusion in race, language, and nation. By exploring how the hybrid rejects claims of boundedness within race, language, and nation, I suggest that cultural studies like these are imperative in considering the politics of representation. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use a definition of hybridity referring to the integration of cultural bodies, signs, and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures.

Framing Hybridity

Among postcolonial theorists, there is a wide consensus that hybridity arose out of the culturally internalized interactions between “colonizers” and “the colonized” and the dichotomous formation of these identities. Considered by some the father of hybrid theory, Homi Bhabha argued that colonizers and the colonized are mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture. His text *The Location of*

Culture (1994) suggested that there is a “Third Space of Enunciation” in which cultural systems are constructed. In this claim, he aimed to create a new language and mode of describing the identity of Selves and Others. Bhabha says:

It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences -- literature, art, music, ritual, life, death -- and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation -- migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation -- makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ized), unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of cultures particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition (1994: 247).

In using words like “diaspora, displacement, relocation,” Bhabha illustrates the dynamic nature of culture, and the flimsy consistency of the historical narratives that cultures rely upon to draw boundaries and define themselves. As a result, culture cannot be defined in and of itself, but rather must be seen within the context of its construction. More significantly, Bhabha draws attention to the reliance of cultural narratives upon the Other. In illuminating this mutual construction of culture, studies of hybridity can offer the opportunity for a counter-narrative, a means by which the dominated can reclaim shared ownership of a culture that relies upon them for meaning. This theoretical perspective will serve as the foundation for the considerations explored in this paper, employing hybridity as a powerful tool for liberation from the domination imposed by bounded definitions of race, language, and nation.

Race

Racial hybridity, or the integration of two races which are assumed to be distinct and separate entities, can be considered first in terms of the physical body. Historically, the corporeal hybrid was birthed from two symbolic poles, a bodily representation of colonizer and colonized. These mixed births, *mestizo*, *mulatto*, *muwallad*, were stigmatized as a physical representation of impure blood, and this racism long served as a tool of power that maintained that even in this blending of two bodies, just “one drop” of black blood would deem the body impure and alien, an abomination. Institutionalized racism created a perpetual state of ambiguity and placelessness for the hybrid body and prevented cultural inclusion via race (Memmi 1965). However, the expanse of immigration since colonialism and the spectrum of shades of visible difference point to an increasingly hybrid populace in which these classifications of black and white no longer carry the same power of representation, yet the old labels persist.

It was not until the year 2000 that the US Census included options for multiracial identification, having symbolically denied the complexity of its population until that time. This represented a deeply significant shift in the accepted notion of race as fixed and bound and the coercion of the multiracial to *choose one*. Similarly, the election of Barack Obama, the product of Caucasian and African ancestry, in 2008 seemed to serve as collective acceptance of hybrid bodies, no longer demonized as an abomination. However, Obama was still widely labeled by one race rather than both races, deemed the first “African American President.” This labeling is significant as it elucidates the continuing power of racial labels in a society set on fixing bodies in racial space by binding them to labels, which are understood to contain fixed truths. I argue that utilizing the conceptual tool of hybridity to deconstruct these labels allows a means by which hybrid individuals can come together in powerful solidarity, rather than allowing their ambiguous place in racial space to render them invisible. Harnessing racial hybridity to project the simultaneously unique but common experience of hybridity can be a means by which the individual subject can join to a marginal community through stories and partial memories (Ahmed 1999). Furthermore, racial hybridity must harness the dualistic experience of passing, or being mistaken for a race other than one’s own. All identities involve passing to some extent, in that a subject’s self can never truly match its image, but racial passing implicitly deconstructs the boundaries of Black and White. In passing, hybridity might function not as a conflict or struggle between two racial identities, but instead as constant movement between spaces, passing through and between identity itself without origin or arrival (Ahmed 1999). The freedom to move between identities carries its own power in defying the claims of essentialized racial identity.

Furthermore, the bounded labels of race do not account for the historical and geographic narratives that lie behind each body and inform their identity. In “Black Africans and Native Americans”, Jack Forbes explores the disconnect between racial labels and the consciousness of the bodies behind them using Native Americans and Africans as examples by which “groups are forced into arbitrary categories render their ethnic heritage simple rather than complex” (1988: 271). As a result, hybridity calls into question the boundaries of racial consciousness as a hybrid consciousness defies the imposed limits of race. The management of these identities becomes its own sort of performance, as the body negotiates each consciousness in different spaces. Again, the ability to play multiple roles, to “pass” in different arenas, carries significant power. In embodying the inability to bind identities to race, racial hybridity both in the physical body and in consciousness offers a means of deconstructing the boundaries of dichotomous racial identities.

Language

In addition to race, language has long been bound in definitions as a symbol of nation and a mode of exclusion. As a means to connect with other social beings, communicating with language is a meaningful performance in that speaking requires two parties, one to perform language and an audience to observe and absorb language. During colonialism, as the colonizer’s language dominated national institutions, the

sense of being outside and “othered” was instilled in the colonized as their language and means of communication was stripped away (Memmi 1965). Now in a time after colonialism, can the colonized ever reclaim a language long lost, or has the colonizer’s language become their own? Has ownership of the colonizer’s language expanded over time? Fanon’s theorizing addresses the power of language in the formation of identity as he says, “To speak . . . means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization,” (1967: 17-18). He suggests that speaking the language of the colonizer stands in as acceptance or coercion into accepting a role in culture. Yet in accepting a role, whether by choice or force, the meaning of the culture shifts and evolves. No longer does it “belong” to the colonizer, as it relies upon the colonized to give it shape. Similarly, with the introduction of a new set of users performing a language, the language no longer exists as it was; it has shifted in meaning.

Beyond the thematic implications of language, hybridity has inspired an immense movement in literary discourse and understandings of the very way language is managed and owned. Herskovits developed the notion of *syncretism*, a theory attempting to explain why certain cultural forms are carried and others lost. Similarly, Claude Levi-Strauss developed the term *bricolage* to describe mixed forms within narratives. *Creolization* describes the linguistic blending of dominant and subdominant cultures. These examples illustrate the broad realm of studies that have developed simply around the use of hybridized language. In an analysis of the rise of the “hybrid genre” in postmodern literature, Kapchan and Strong say, “Hybridization has become one such analytic allegory, defining lines of interest and affiliation among scholars of popular and literary culture, perhaps quite unintentionally. The extent to which these authors use the metaphor of hybridity consciously and concisely differs. That they use it, however, qualifies hybridity as one of several tropes, or forms of metaphoric predication, that most epitomize the scholarship of the last decade,” (1999: 246). Not only does this observation imply that the body of hybridized literature is growing, harkening to the rising voices and representations of the hybrid, but that hybridity is becoming normalized as an accepted form of literature and the purist notion of genre is diminishing.

Furthermore, the use of a colonizer’s language by the colonized to speak of the crimes of colonialism is its own transgression and act of resistance. In taking ownership of the language, changing the way that it is used, the boundaries of language as belonging to a specific place or race are dissolved. Jahan Ramazani’s *Hybrid Muse* is an analytical review of the poetry that has arisen from the hybridization of the English muse with the long-resident muses of Africa, India, the Caribbean, and other decolonizing territories of the British Empire (2001). A hybrid himself, Ramazani suggests that the use of indigenous metaphors, rhythms, creoles, and genres has allowed a new form of poetry that not only speaks of the violence and displacement of colonialism, but embodies it in its very form. These hybrid poetries can be viewed as a gateway to understanding those once deemed unfamiliar, and hybridity of language becomes a way by which to deconstruct borders and relate to collectives across cultural boundaries.

National Culture

Further, hybridity must interrogate the notion that nationality is essentialized in a distinct culture, that geographic borders somehow embody inherent knowledge or truth about the people they contain. Mamdani asks, "How do you tell who is indigenous to the country and who is not? Given a history of migration, what is the dividing line between the indigenous and the nonindigenous?" (2005: 10). He addresses the nationalist concern over entitlement to nation, and the indigenous wish to lay claim to culture. I suggest that theories of hybridity, in clarifying the shifting and indefinite nature of culture, can serve as a tool that complicate the nationalist exclusionary practice of determining who does and does not have claim to a nation. From health care to immigration, his arguments resonate loudly with current events.

Similarly, we must consider the ways in which the "things" that give culture meaning are unfixed and variable, negating essentialist arguments about inherent meanings of culture. In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford (1988) analyzes sites including anthropology, museums, and travel writing to take a critical ethnography of the West and its shifting relationships with other societies. He demonstrates how "other" national cultures are in fact fictions and mythical narratives, and we must ask the question of representation and who has the authority to speak for a group's identity. In his article "Diasporas", he suggests that "The old localizing strategies – by bounded community, by organic culture, by region, by center and periphery--- may obscure as much as they reveal" (Clifford 1994). Diaspora is defined as a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship. In this consideration of culture, we understand the vast connotations of displacement, from asking which history the diasporic should identify with to asking if it is even possible to return to a homeland one never knew or left long ago. Second, in the representation of culture, be it by petrifying culture in a museum or nailing it to an anthropological account, the risk lies in taking these subjective moments as truths or knowledge. Furthermore, the far-reaching diasporic symbols and narratives that snowball into this thing we call national culture suggest that culture is itself a traveler collecting artifacts from various locations along the way, and its walls are too insubstantial to be used as a means of exclusion.

Third and perhaps most significant, hybridity in a postcolonial world muddles the very definitions of culture by which nations define themselves. Given that nationalism is founded upon a collective consciousness from shared loyalty to a culture, one would assume this culture is well-defined. Yet the "solid" roots of historical and cultural narratives that nations rely upon are diasporic, with mottled points of entry at various points in time. An investigation of the roots of cultural symbols like folk stories, religion, and music would reveal sources varied and wide-ranging. Furthermore, culture is defined in relationship to Other cultures. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) offers a strong description of the system by which nations appropriate from Others to define themselves. He suggests Orientalism "has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience"

(Said 1979: 1-2). Using a theoretical framework influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemonic culture and Foucault's notion of discourse, Said draws significant attention to the intricate and complex process by which the West must use the East to construct itself, its culture, its meaning. In an illuminating excerpt describing the process of Orientalism, he writes:

To formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its 'natural' role as an appendage to Europe; to dignify all the knowledge collected during colonial occupation with the title 'contribution to modern learning; when the natives had neither been consulted nor treated as anything except as pretexts for a text whose usefulness was not to the natives; to feel oneself as a European in command, almost at will, of Oriental history, time, and geography...to make out of every observable detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type; and, above all, to transmute living reality into the stuff of texts, to possess (or think one possesses) actuality mainly because nothing in the Orient seems to resist one's powers." (1979: 86)

In a stream of fragments, Said shows the diverse processes by which dominant cultures are formed at the service of Others. Using words like "shape," "definition," and "transmute," he describes the *act* of defining nation and the artificial nature of these boundaries. Said offers a theoretical means by which to reject nationalist divisions between an Us and Them, a West and Other. This conceptualization of the ways in which nations determine not only their own national identities, but the identities of Other is powerful in revealing the inherently hybrid roots of national culture. Studies of national identity are thus essential in deconstructing xenophobic nationalist claims to nation and the resulting miscegenation of immigrant Others.

Conclusion

This discussion draws from the body of postcolonial literature to suggest that studies of cultural hybridity are powerful in probing the bounded labels of race, language, and nation that maintain social inequalities. By examining how the hybrid can deconstruct boundaries within race, language, and nation, I suggest that hybridity has the ability to empower marginalized collectives and deconstruct bounded labels, which are used in the service of subordination. In essence, hybridity has the potential to allow once subjugated collectivities to reclaim a part of the cultural space in which they move. Hybridity can be seen not as a means of division or sorting out the various histories and diverse narratives to individualize identities, but rather a means of reimagining an interconnected collective. Like the skin on a living body, the collective body has a surface that also feels and "Borders materialize as an effect on intensifications of feeling...individual and collective bodies surface through the very orientations we take to objects and others," (Ahmed 2004: 39). In the suggestion that

our orientations can be shifted, our feelings towards Others transformed, there is a possibility of redefining our exclusionary systems of labeling.

Furthermore, breaking down immaterial borders through explorations of hybridity offers the possibility of more effective public policy, one that refers to the broad expanse of its diverse population. Frenkel and Shenhav did an illuminating study on the ways in which studies of hybridity have allowed management and organization studies to manage their longstanding western hegemonic practices and to incorporate postcolonial insights into the organizational literature revolving around the relationships between Orientalism and organizations (2006). The willingness of institutions to reform their long held ideologies in light of a changing world, as well as to consider their work through alternative (non-Western) lenses, is an essential practice in deconstructing the bindings of narratives-as-knowledge. In the boundary-shifting process, there is power in the notion of deconstruction in the service of reconstruction, breaking down boundaries in order to form a more inclusive sense of the collectivity.

Furthermore, hybridity asserts the notion that representations of collective identity must be analyzed contextually. When we examine a representation of culture, be it in a film, poem, or speech, we should ask: Who is doing the representing? What are the implications of the representation? Why are they engaging in the process of representation? What is the historical moment that informs the representation? How are they being represented? In addition to the questions explored in this paper, I would recommend applying theories of hybridity to a realm beyond race and nation, in order to consider alternative boundaries such as gender and sexuality. The work of hybrid theorists from Bhabha to Said suggests that there is a vast intellectual landscape for cultural inquiries like these. Our mission must be to continue this work and to delve deeper. Cultural studies have great potential to liberate us from the socially-given boundaries that so stubbornly limit our capacity for thought and discussion, but we must take time to join in a collective critique of the knowledge we ingest and disperse. After all, the greatest power lies in the heart of the collective.

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