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Abstract

In recent times the term hybridity has become almost a cliché: it is used as both a descriptor and a category' of analysis of certain kinds of cultural formations and identities. When hybridity is used as a descriptor it usually connotes a fusion of unlike elements. For example, world music is defined as a hybrid form consisting of a mixture of musical influences from various cultures (a bit of didgeridoo mixed with Pan pipes Tibetan chants African drumming etc.): likewise, the new Australian 'fusion cuisine' is based on a so-called East-meets- West culinary union.

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In recent times the term hybridity has become almost a cliché: it is used as both a descriptor and a category of analysis of certain kinds of cultural formations and identities. When hybridity is used as a descriptor it usually connotes a fusion of unlike elements. For example, world music is defined as a hybrid form consisting of a mixture of musical influences from various cultures (a bit of didgeridoo mixed with Pan pipes Tibetan chants African drumming etc.): likewise, the new Australian 'fusion cuisine' is based on a so-called East-meets-West culinary union.

Hybridity, in this sense, serves as a stabilising function which settles and resolves cultural differences: it creates a synthesis which subsumes and transforms its constituting parts into a new whole. This form of hybridity speaks to our postmodern globalising present: cultural barriers become increasingly permeable as we jet around the world, source exotic herbal remedies from our local Coles New World supermarket, read about feng shui in *Women's Day*, and exchange information at 'x' bytes per second. Within this privileged developed world context, hybridity celebrates the proliferation of differences as cultural boundaries are crossed, collapsed, fused, confused, commodified and commercialised. It seems that anything is up for grabs, any cultural resource from any part of the world is available and marketable. I call this cultural free-for-all 'happy hybridity': there is little sense of tension or conflict involved in this conception of cross-cultural encounter.¹ More importantly, by focussing only on the endless play of difference between cultures without a more considered sense of historical and political contextualisation, happy hybridity becomes nothing more than a celebration of political in-difference. It is best expressed by this little song:

I love the world
The world loves me
Let's party on
Interculturally

But focusing only on the celebratory aspects of happy hybridity can be an excuse for staying under our collective coconut shell, and not dealing with the underlying issues of power asymmetries in our society and the ways in which we engage with other societies. Happy hybridity enables us to ignore issues of racism, gender discrimination, and economic exploitation. By representing the cross-cultural encounter as an unproblematic fusion, happy hybridity denies the existence of loss, of grief, of contradictions and irreconcilable differences which are also part of the cross-cultural experience.

'She doesn't look like a mail order bride ... though you never can tell. They all look alike.'

'Well, she's definitely not his!'

You can just see the scenarios being played out as they exercise the up-down zipper stare In 1970s Perth, we were an oddity: Mum, my Caucasian step-dad and I. We're not one of them, I tried to say ... this is legit. See, here's the marriage certificate, her bank balance, his CV, my passport ... we're legit ... we belong ... fair dinkum.

We build a home in the sandy white suburbs of Willetton, south of the River Swan in Western Australia. One morning as Ah Tae, my step-dad, steps out in his sarung to pick the papers, the garbage man yells out, 'hey mate, your skirt's getting wet!'

After that, the sarung was always accompanied by a dressing gown.

And the silk jackets, the beaded slippers and batik wraps, all the loving gifts from family back home lay secured in plastic bags on the floor of the wardrobe. I still hankered for sambal belacan and steamed coconut rice although I no longer ate using my fingers. I learnt that the body always betrays ... so clothes, gesture and accent had to be schooled for fear of letting the sarung show.

The uncritical celebration of hybridity runs the risk of collapsing the heterogeneous experiences of translated lives; it denies embodied experiences and instead transforms cultural difference into a fetishised display and consumption of Otherness. Happy hybridity acts as a kind of 'white-wash', giving the illusion of cultural diversity and social progressiveness while perpetuating the status quo. In Australia, the discourse of happy hybridity dovetails into official multiculturalism; the appearance of visible cultural pluralism fulfils the desire to claim that Australia has arrived on the world stage as a fully-fledged cosmopolis.

Official multiculturalism assumes that culture is fixed and the management of cultural diversity becomes a process of cultural pigeonholing. We are asked to identify as Greek, Thai, Chinese, Irish, Lebanese, French and so forth, beneath the folkloric banner. So, in a paradoxical way, multiculturalism actually perpetuates monoculturalism. Official Australian multiculturalism is based on the premise of cultural enrichment; that is, cultural difference from the 'ethnics' is perceived as a supplement to the dominant culture. The ethnics spice up the old meat and 3 veg; they gave us:

Rendang, yeeros, sushi, pho
laksa, roti, adobo
babagannoush with bak choy,
sangria, lasagne, focaccia ... I wantya!

It is not surprising that culinary clichés are often used to describe and legitimise Australia's multiculturalism because the language of enrichment and in-corporation privileges the palatable and aestheticised elements of multiculturalism. The rhetoric of enrichment appeals precisely because it effectively reproduces an assimilationist economy of cultural containment and control.²

The use of culinary clichés is not just something that the dominant culture 'does' to the 'ethnics'. 'We' are often equally complicit in subscribing to the use of food and other related 'exotica' as markers of our difference. The American writer and critic, Frank Chin, coined the term 'food pornography' to describe the conscious exoticisation of one's ethnic foodways as a means of entering the dominant culture.³ He sees the often nostalgic use of food imagery, and references to eating and cooking rituals as food that has been detoxified, depoliticised and made safe for recreational consumption. The bottom line for Chin is that food pornography is self-defeating because it is determined by the limits of tolerance of the dominant culture.

While it is certainly a highly contradictory situation whereby the very cultural production of overt food imagery simultaneously proclaims and undermines one's ethnicity and difference, I do not think it is entirely cut and dried. Pornography can also be a knowing and strategic play with desire: the desire to belong; the desire to maintain cultural autonomy; the desire to assert cultural difference. The pornographic performer can wield a degree of agency within such a transaction: it all depends on how consciously and critically that transaction is negotiated, and under what terms and conditions.

What is missing in the eagerness to embrace and celebrate the rhetoric of happy hybridity is a self-reflexiveness and awareness of the complexity of local histories and culture-specific knowledges in all their density, contradictions and contingencies. Instead, Australian society has a culture of mainstream criticism which attempts to convince itself that multiculturalism at the level of folk display is 'a good thing', so long as it doesn't encroach on the political centre.

*Hands delicately laced with filigreed henna
Dreadlocks cascading over
Guess T-shirt
Sarung slung hips
Bindhi-spotted, kohl-rimmed
SBS-watching, cappuccino-drinking NESB-ian⁴.
I am
You are
...
Multicultural Chic.*

consciously used to tease out the complexities of cross-cultural encounters. Hybridity as a critical strategy has the potential to unsettle and dismantle power relations because it focuses, not on fusion, but on the process of negotiation and contestation between cultures. Hybridity is not therefore perceived as just a 'natural' product of cross-cultural encounter but rather as a site of political agency, ironic commentary, and a knowing play with desire.

The aim of intentional hybridity is to focus on the process of cultural collision itself, and to create an ironic double-consciousness which foregrounds different worldviews and different forms of being. The cultural encounter throws up the possibility of at least two voices, two ways of knowing, which recognise, cross, contradict and dialogue with each other. Within this hybridising hyphenated space, new identities and new embodied knowledges come into being, bearing the rawness and rough edges of the cultural struggle.

Canberra, 1995

Her first Anzac parade. It's really rather fascinating, she thinks, as she casts her ethnographic eye over the crowds. She's surprised at the number of teenagers and young families.

Soon, she's snug amongst them, sipping hot coffee, and clapping and cheering.

Then the Southern Vietnamese veterans march by, alongside their Australian counterparts.

And she suddenly remembers that the body is always marked, sometimes wrongly.

So she puts on her sunglasses, in case they mistake her for a Japanese.

Asian-Australian is an identity category increasingly asserted by Australians of Asian-descent (both migrant and Australian born). The use of the hyphen between Asian and Australian draws attention to the hybrid interaction between the two cultures. Hybridity is claimed as an intentional strategy to counter dominant perceptions of the diasporic Asian as lacking — as inauthentic Asian (the banana or coconut syndrome: yellow or brown on the outside, white on the inside) and/or as illegitimate (because not White or Aboriginal) Australian. Asian-Australians claim hybridity and in-betweenness as a site of fluid identification which enables us to be both Asian and Australian, alternatively, simultaneously, provisionally. Our hyphenated hybrid consciousness as Asian-Australians may even allow us to dismantle some of the fixed preconceptions of what counts as Asian and as Australian. Self-identification in this sense becomes performative; it becomes a political choice, in response to the context, and is negotiated at every point.

*Over and over I return to Body⁵
my beginning, my end,
the Self that can never be left behind.*

Hybridity as a mode of identification offers alternative ways of being Asian in Australia, it offers a counter-inscription to the gook, the chog, the new Australian, the migrant, the NESB-ian. Diasporic identities become adept at camouflage: for survival, for play, for pleasure, for security, for revenge. Camouflage is not about becoming something or someone else, leaving some body behind. Nor is camouflage a matter of pretence, about being something you're not; rather camouflage is a process of transforming identity. Consider the chameleon: always changing, different yet the same as its environment. Camouflage is inherently performative because the source of being lies in adapting and transforming continuously, contingently, and partially, to the environment. The self comes into being through this multiple layering of camouflaged selves, one on top of the other. But these layers of camouflage are never able to produce a perfect fit, a perfect cover; there is always the sliver of slippage, the rasp of rupture. The edges of past selves insist on peeping out and disturbing the clean outline of the new layer, the new shape.

The camouflaging layers will never be able to fully cover and contain the plurality within, and it is this misfit, this excess, which best describes my understanding of intentional hybridity as an ironic and politicised consciousness. The sarung will always show; there can never be a perfect fit between the layers of camouflage. The choice, for me, is whether to ignore and deny its peeping presence, or to use this misfit strategically to navigate the hyphenated space of being Asian in Australia.

To go beyond hybridity is to resist taking hybridity at face value, no matter how seductive and attractive those 'United Colors of Benetton' advertisements with their multiracial cast of models might be. What's needed is a more critical way of looking at how the discourse of hybridity is articulated and mobilised as a critical strategy so that issues of power inequities are not overlooked and more care is taken to understand what is lost, as much as what is gained, in the process of crossing cultures.

NOTES

- ¹ For a fuller examination of the different modes of hybridity, see Jacqueline Lo, 'Beyond Happy Hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian Identities'.
- ² See Sunvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, 'The Limits of Multicultural Representation'.
- ³ Cited by Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, 56.

- ⁴ SBS is an Australian television channel dedicated to multiculturalism; 'Non-English Speaking Background' (NESB) is a term used in official multicultural discourse in the 1980s and early 90s.
- ⁵ From Chin Woon Ping, 'Details Cannot Body Wants', p. 108.

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