

Laura Popa, Roeland Goorts (eds.)

**Cultural Identities in a Global World:
Reframing Cultural Hybridity**

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Additionally, we would like to thank all the participants for their commitment to spend three days glued to their digital devices in out-of-the-ordinary circumstances. When Clara Verri and Laura Popa started conceptualising the conference on hybridity in the winter term of 2019, they envisioned it as a gathering in presence. Little did they know about the near future and that all events would have to be conducted digitally in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore a pleasure to extend our thanks to the speakers and chairs at the conference for their contribution to fostering a sense of togetherness despite geographical limitations, different time zones, and work constraints.

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Late Pnina Werbner, who had accepted our invitation to participate as one of the conference's chairs, attended the entire conference with professionalism, kindness, and wit. After the event, she graciously accepted the invitation to write the Foreword.

Regrettably, she has passed away. It is an honour to still be able to include her Foreword, and we extend our thanks to Richard Werbner for allowing us to publish this beautifully written preface. Since her outstanding work on hybridity is like a red thread that runs throughout this volume, we dedicate this publication to her memory. We have had the privilege of working with a truly remarkable scholar who possessed exceptional academic standards and genuine warmth, humility, and a sense of humour, making her a well-rounded and exemplary human being who will be sorely missed.

Cambridge & Iași / Leuven, June 2024

Laura Popa and Roeland Goorts

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FOREWORD

PNINA WERBNER

A major fallacy regarding hybridity theory is the truism that the very notion of ‘cultural hybridity’ implies a ‘mixture’ of two discrete, and hence bounded, ‘cultures’. To refute this claim, I want to draw here on a key distinction made by Mikhail Bakhtin between ‘organic’ and ‘intentional’ hybridities (1981). The point I take from Bakhtin is that all cultures, like languages, are continuously evolving, unconsciously and organically; they are neither bounded nor fixed. At the same time, however, intentional, transgressive, newly created, *deliberate* and often shocking cultural mixings challenge normative separations or dominant hegemonies and are the grounds for reflexivity and the public bridging of cultural differences.

The point I want to make, then, is that while there may be many routine cultural mixings and collages, our focus should be on the *ethical* and *political* power of cultural hybridity to effect real, emancipatory change, particularly in defence of minority cultural and human rights. Cultural mixings should thus be conceived of as conjoined with social responsibility and care for the other, respect for difference and a challenge to established inequalities and hierarchies.

An important insight here is Homi K. Bhabha’s understanding of cultural hybridity as a “doubling up of the sign”, a “splitting” which is “less than one and double” (1994: 119): the same object or custom placed in a different context acquires quite new meanings while echoing old ones. In social media, cultural images are displaced and recreated by ordinary people using photoshop, montage and collage to create potent new meanings that ironise, lampoon, caricature, shock and mobilise. So too, the performance of popular culture in new, unexpected contexts, in the demand for freedom, individual rights and democracy, forges a vernacular cosmopolitanism which challenges autocratic regimes.

Cultural hybridity as a political aesthetic has retained its interruptive, emancipatory force in today’s world, through an enhanced capacity to mix language and images even beyond postcolonial intellectual elites. A demotic world of activists has created local, vernacular cosmopolitans that combine a demand for democracy, equality, and transparency, rearticulated with local culture, traditions, and history.

Scholars have continued to struggle with the central dilemma of cultural hybridity: how to respect, protect and defend the valued ‘cultures’ of vulnerable minorities while at the same time allowing cultural creativity and cultural openness to thrive nationally and internationally. Various terms have been suggested to replace a putatively closed, defensive multiculturalism that seems to set communities apart, from cosmopolitanism to interculturalism. But the intractable paradoxes of culture and multiculturalism remain today as vital as ever.

To return to Bakhtin’s distinction between organic and intentional hybridities: the latter, I have argued, is always surprising, disruptive, interruptive, thought-provoking, con-

sciousness-making. Historically, rather than ‘intentional’ hybridity we may perhaps speak of the moment of first encounters between quite unlike performative modes of thinking, expression, or exchange. Such encounters can be violent as in the case of imperialism and colonialism, but they are always surprising and mind-shattering. In the present volume, contributors speak of encounters between two modes of approaching the sacred (Shaw), two modes of storytelling (Márquez), and quite different economic systems, pre-capitalism and capitalism (Langenohl). The point is that each system, seen alone, may be dynamic and changing so that it cannot be essentialised, but the gap between previously unknown systems is so great that bringing them together is experienced as disruptive. It thus resembles but differs from the intentional hybridity deliberately created by artists and intellectuals in situations where mixings have become routine and taken-for-granted.

Which brings me to the issue of globalisation. It seems trivial to say that we live in a hybridised world, a world of endless cultural and performative mixings. This is a clear instance of what I call organic hybridity. There is nothing particularly shocking or thought-provoking about such mixings; nor are they ethical, apart from the fact that they point to a single, encompassing world of fluid boundaries. Imported material goods, international films and music, global celebrities, and world sports – all constitute global events and are accepted as ‘normal’ everyday routines, practices and modes of consumption. They are non-essentialising in a trivial sense of being fluid and changing, responsive to fashion and new technological inventions.

But global events have also required global responses: the Coronavirus pandemic, the catastrophic impact of climate change, and even the war between Russia and Ukraine. There are transnational NGOs and UN world organisations such as the WHO which mobilise in the face of these events. These are not ‘hybrid’ organisations. Hunger in the Horn of Africa, deadly floods in Pakistan, dangerous endemic illnesses such as malaria and ebola, the destruction of the Amazon – these are global predicaments that require humanitarian responses. So too does the defence of human rights. The UN Security Council is dysfunctional but many transnational organisations and charities, some under the auspices of the UN, operate globally to alleviate the sufferings of ordinary people. In this new world order cultural hybridity, the mixing of languages, modes of living and etiquette, enable these organisations to work, often against cultural and religious fundamentalism. Taken-for-granted, organic hybridity underpins the new world order and its cosmopolitan ethics.

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INTRODUCTION¹

LAURA POPA

The current fascination with cultural hybridity masks an elusive paradox. Hybridity is celebrated as powerfully interruptive and yet theorized as commonplace and pervasive. [...] how is postmodernist theory to make sense, at once, of both sides, both routine hybridity and transgressive power? Even more, what do we mean by cultural hybridity when identity is built in the face of postmodern uncertainties that render even the notion of strangerhood meaningless? (Werbner 2015: 1–2)

[...] when the very concept of culture disintegrates at first touch into multiple positionings, according to gender, age, class, ethnicity, and so forth? As Culture evaporates into a war of positions, we are left wondering what it might possibly mean to ‘have’ a cultural ‘identity’. In the present deconstructive moment, any unitary conception of a ‘bounded’ culture is pejoratively labelled naturalistic and essentialist. But the alternatives seem equally unconvincing: if ‘culture’ is merely a false intellectual construction, a manipulative invocation by unscrupulous elite or a *bricolage* [...] – where does the destructive or revitalising power of cultural identities and hybridities come from? (Ibid.: 3–4)

1. Premise

Drawing on Pnina Werbner’s thought-provoking questions (2015) just quoted at the beginning of this contribution, this volume is the result of the conference *Cultural Identities in a Global World: Reframing Cultural Hybridity*. The event took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic from June 23 to 25, 2021, as a project of Research Area 6: Cultural Identities of the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) at the University of Giessen in Germany. 29 junior and experienced scholars based in Germany, the UK, Netherlands, Austria, Italy, Portugal, Turkey, the US, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, India, and Morocco presented their research and engaged in scholarly debate. Different formats such as one keynote lecture, eight panels, two workshops, and a conclusive laboratory debate allowed a vivid exchange of ideas.

The conference was premised on the idea that hybridity may help us critically investigate who we are and where we are heading in our twenty-first century-interconnected global world. That raised a series of critical questions. Hybridity may seem like a solution to a cultural identity crisis for many, but is that the case? Is it indeed a tool to escape

¹ I acknowledge Clara Verri’s contribution to this conceptual framework. The volume is the result of the conference we conceptualised and organised together in 2021.

essentialism? But what about the notion that we have always been hybrids? If, as Werbner rightly observed, “All cultures are always hybrid” (2015: 15), what remains left of this highly debated concept? The question is, does academia still have something valuable to say about hybridity? Are “public institutions and multinational companies” of late-capitalist societies creating even more inequality and power imbalances by welcoming immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Global South to forge a new form of hybridity that benefits only “the mainstream society” (Ha 2006)? Has hybridity become a racist commodity in the Global North, which seems “obsessed with immigrant newcomers” whose cultural practices are seen as “exotic ingredients” to be celebrated as “colorful Otherness” (ibid.), “outlandish and weirdly funny” (Lavie/Swedenburg 1996: 8)?

Additionally, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread on a planetary scale, we noticed how it exposed cultural hierarchies based on unequal technological development. We thus asked ourselves whether we could learn from that crisis how cultural hybridity can be reconceptualised in theoretical discourses and social practice. The unusual circumstances under which the conference was held raised further questions about political exploitations of hybridity. As it has been an entirely online event due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not help but reflect on its unique format and ethical implications. We were restricted working from home but had to interact in the digital space. These hybrid conditions revealed how quickly the lines between the public and private spheres can become blurred. For the better or the worse for basic human rights? They have presented the advantages of just a click away encounters on a global scale, which have yet to be fully understood and explored. But the very same digital option has been used by governments to impose prolonged restrictions, some of which have been questioned regarding their justification, on in-person religious worship services, for instance.

2. Hybridity as Concept, Method, and Social Practice

To start with, this book’s analytical approach is based on the following observation: the history of the hybridity concept as well as the substantial amount of literature surrounding the issue shows the continuous transformation of its meaning(s). It ranges from biological racist connotations in nineteenth-century colonialism to a powerful subversive tool for analysing asymmetric colonial encounters in twentieth-century postcolonial studies. In the twentieth century, the notion of hybridity and adjacent notions, such as transculturation, denoted this asymmetry. Bringing them into dialogue again in the twenty-first century, these and other related concepts may guide analyses of planetary cultural, economic, and political entanglements that avoid the false objectivism that the notion of ‘globalisation’ implies. As a result, the book critically reconsiders cultural hybridity as a concept for a world globally interconnected without losing the local articulations.

The concept in question has already been extensively covered: there are 587 books and 135125 articles for the term hybridity on the server of the University Library Gießen only. Thus, the concept could eventually become redundant and lose its political