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Hybridity

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paid groups of workers, or manufactured using an array of toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases. And, in the case of our processed dinner, a set of unwholesome ingredients and industrial processes. The fact that the low cost of consumer goods often depends upon forms of inequality and exploitation (only a tiny percentage of purchases are certified as fair trade) is hidden in the world of advertising, something to be skipped over or ignored as we carry on consuming.

The mountains of waste produced by all this consumption are also invisible. There will be no camera shots lingering over the discarded fast-food or soft-drink containers that pollute our urban and rural environments, or pictures of people in the third world rifling through exported toxic piles of waste, or any inkling of the increasing *public* cost of waste disposal. Waste, in the ad world, is somebody else's problem, something that is generally *not* built in to the cost of the product, leaving the taxpayer to pick up the tab. This is another aspect of the hegemony of consumerism, in which environmental problems are seen as subordinate while the needs of a consumer culture are dominant.

In all these cases, the processed dinner advertisement is typical of the way in which hegemony works in media representations. It forms part of a system that repeats certain kinds of images, roles, and ideas while neglecting others. And, in so doing, it makes certain dominant views of the world seem natural or simply part of ordinary life.

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Hybridity

Marwan M. Kraidy

A notion that emerged in biology, thrived in postcolonial theory, then entered media studies as it metastasized throughout the humanities and social sciences, hybridity is emblematic of our era. Used to describe mixtures of cultures, races, languages, systems, even paradigms, hybridity emerged in the 1990s as a master trope, a necessary heuristic device to understand a world in flux. As of this writing, the heyday of hybridity—when it animated entire subfields and spawned heated arguments between celebrants and critics—is behind us. Now largely absent from book titles, conference themes, and intellectual polemics, hybridity has taken residence in interdisciplinary venues like media studies, as a once-dominant concept now content with latent taken-for-granted-ness and banal usage. We now assume, rather than argue over, hybridity.

The notion of hybridity developed in the study of genetic variability. The word entered the English language in the late 1830s, and half a century later it had made the leap from biology to culture, when the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1890 used hybridity to compare linguistic to racial mixture. Synonyms of hybridity were in circulation much earlier. Both *métissage* (French) and *mestizaje* (Spanish) harken back to the Latin *miscere*, “to mix.” In the twelfth century, Old Provençal included the word *mestif*, and in 1615 the feminine *métice* was in use. The Spanish term *mestizo* appeared in 1600, and the French *métis* in 1690. *Mestizaje* emerged as the official ideology of newly independent Latin American nations,

as a discourse integrating local identities and cultures in a politico-economic system dominated by the creole elite, born in the colonies from Spanish parentage. Various historical contexts have spawned assorted notions: *mestizaje*, *métissage*, transculturation, creolization, syncretism (see Kraidy 2005).

A heated, wide-ranging debate has revolved around hybridity and power. Notions of fusion lend themselves to rival interpretations, one focused on celebrating hybridity's progressive potential, one emphasizing that hybridity reflects relations of dominance, since it is often colonized, occupied, and subordinate cultures that get hybridized, on the terms of the dominant party. Overlapping with ancient scuffles and contemporary skirmishes about culture and influence, the question of power has remained important to uses of hybridity in media studies. This is manifest in global media studies and in research on migrant and diasporic media.

Hybridity arose in global media studies after decades during which dependency theory and media imperialism enjoyed primacy, and elicited concerns that scholars were jettisoning the study of inequality and power in global communication favored by those approaches in favor of glib celebrations of cultural mixture (Boyd-Barrett 1998; Mattelart 1994). Indeed, some studies of media texts through the prism of hybridity tended not to focus on issues of power (Lee 1991; Olson 1999), but critics of hybridity often elevated caricatures of hybridity theorists before savaging them (for example, Ahmad's attack on Bhabha, in Ahmad 1995). Nonetheless, the impassioned debate made the vexed relation between hybridity and power salient. In critically minded global media studies, this concern translated into efforts to understand hybridity as the very condition of culture, and to comprehend how constantly shifting material and discursive structures shaped various manifestations of hybridity (Kraidy 2005).

Hybridities, then, are better understood in the plural, and by being particularly attuned to this, Latin American scholars decisively influenced the deployment of hybridity in media studies. This is shaped by the peculiar history of Latin America, the ways global movements of people and resources under violent imperial dominion have shaped nations characterized by cultural and racial mixture. Ever since the Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz (1940/1983, 1995) conceived of the vibrant mixtures characteristic of Cuban culture through the notion of transculturation, hybridity has been pervasive in Latin American cultural theory. But most influential in media studies during the past quarter century have been contemporary scholars like the Spanish-Columbian Jesús Martín-Barbero and the Argentinean-Mexican Néstor García-Canclini (for a survey of Latin American cultural and media theory, see Rodríguez and Murphy 1997).

A key contribution of the rise of hybridity has been to expose media centrism and promote alternative conceptions of the role of media in culture. Martín-Barbero's seminal work (1987, 1993) made the ostensibly basic but actually momentous argument that focusing research directly and solely on the media was insufficient, even misleading, in the quest to understand how communication operates in cultural terrains. Central to his intervention was the notion of *mestizaje*, which to Martín-Barbero captures not only cultural fusion, but also continuities and ruptures between social, economic, and cultural dynamics. These processes, defined as mediations, underscore a vision of hybridity that is historically deep and geographically wide, and one that articulates communication to culture and politics. The contemporary *telenovela* (serialized television drama) connects to older folk/popular cultural forms like Mexican *corridos* and Colombian *vallenatos*, while containing traces of Latin American magical realism. Hybridity is at once the process by which cultural hegemony is

achieved and its outcome. It is permeated by power and inequality, and to understand it we must develop complex approaches that jettison dualistic perspectives—modernity versus tradition, rural against urban, local contra global—on media and culture (Martín-Barbero 1987). Hybridity augurs an exit from cultural dualism and binary analysis in media studies.

Another key contribution of scholarship on hybridity has been the reintroduction of a cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibility to media studies, one nonetheless grounded in politics. Rejecting magical realism and dependency theory, two dominant conceptual apparatuses for understanding Latin America, García-Canclini (1989, 1995) instead proposed hybridity as a tool capable of grasping the complexities of the “multitemporal heterogeneity” and mixed political systems of Latin America. Seeing in hybridity a map of the fraught and multiple interrelations between traditional culture and modern forces, García-Canclini coined the notion of “impure genres.” The hybrid aesthetics of genres like graffiti and comics illustrate contradictions between various political, economic, technological, and social forces shaping contemporary culture, but also enable an understanding of the complex interplay between these forces. This notion of hybridity is political because it accounts for strategic practices of inclusion and exclusion with which modern societies filter traditional culture. Hybridity for García-Canclini is a theory of “oblique power,” focusing on the interweaving of power and culture between and within social classes, ethnic groups, and national communities.

Grounded in hybridity and in assorted notions (creolization, transculturation, etc.) that demonstrate the bankruptcy of narratives of cultural purity and national distinctiveness, the imperative to eschew dualistic approaches and to consider power as indirect, ambivalent, and diffuse affected studies of media and culture in different parts of the world—popular culture in Hong Kong

(Lee 1991), globalization and nationalism in Indian television (Kumar 2006), citizenship and Latino identity in the United States (Amaya 2013), global blockbuster movies (Wang and Yeh 2005), Japanese popular culture in Asia (Iwabuchi 2002), the complex tripartite hybridity of French, Japanese, and US cultural production (Darling-Wolf 2015), and the Arab culture wars triggered by reality television (Kraidy 2010). The imprint of hybridity theory was more or less direct, but always manifest, in these and other studies.

By offering a compelling alternative to media centrism, grounding cultural fusion in political power, exposing the tenuousness of discourses of purity and homogeneity, and emphasizing the importance of aesthetics, the rise of hybridity compelled work that tackled at once the three traditional realms of media studies—production, text, and reception—helping usher a field more attuned to cultural complexity, less provincially Anglo-American, and more at ease with the nested ambivalences of cultural forms.

This could already be seen in diasporic and migrant media studies that emerged in the 1990s. Immigrants like Punjabis in the United Kingdom, it turned out, watch television in ways that subvert the culture of the host country (Gillespie 1995). But more importantly, these studies documented practices of cultural production for migrant communities that create hybrid texts that at once attract people with hybrid identities and foster further cultural hybridization. The Iranian community in Los Angeles, for example, had an intricate network of production and broadcasting facilities and resources. The community used these to enact hybridity through practices of mimicry, consisting of pictorial superimposition, ambivalent characters, and incoherent plots and narratives on Iranian television in Los Angeles (Naficy 1993). But with the increased affordability and availability of media production equipment,

immigrants, like Croatians in Australia, started producing videotapes about their lives and sending them to their home country (Kolar-Panov 1997). Thus migrant media studies underscored that communities with mixed cultural identities produce hybrid media texts, in a transnational circuit in which production occurs in the host country while the home country provides creative energy.

This foreshadowed the rise of do-it-yourself (DIY) digital culture, which can be understood as one end of a spectrum that articulates hybridity with human agency and intentionality. On one end, we have media audiences attracted to hybrid texts (created mostly by professional media workers) that resonate with the hybrid identities of viewers. This is, to a large extent, a reactive hybridity. On the other end, we have producers of digital culture, often amateur, actively creating intentionally hybrid texts meant for wider circulation. The Russian formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin distinguished between intentional and organic hybridity, the former spawned by auteur-agents mixing cultural genres, the second emerging from long-term patterns of cultural fusion (Bakhtin 1981). The advent of digital culture, with its formal simplicity and DIY aesthetic (Goriunova 2013), has accelerated and amplified intentional hybridities.

In an age of attention scarcity, aesthetic hybridity is increasingly important in mobilizing publics, and in so doing it becomes an important component of political power and resistance. Forms of artful dissidence that emerged in the Arab uprisings since 2010 are quintessential cases of intentionally hybrid texts strategically designed for maximum impact on the largest possible audience. Consider *Top Goon: Diary of a Little Dictator*, a Syrian finger puppetry show that skewered Bashar al-Assad and went viral in 2011. It is hybrid in multiple ways. It blends the age-old art of finger puppetry with the genre of video and with the digital circulation

afforded by the Internet. It summons familiar global tropes (the Tom Cruise blockbuster *Top Gun*) and the global reality television hit *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and uses these as a platform on which it grafts local political struggles. As a result, it displays the cultural equivalent of what geneticists call “hybrid vigor”—it is vibrant, funny, punchy—which enabled it to cut through the deafening chatter of thousands of revolutionary videos coming out of Syria and achieve global, mainstream, visibility. By combining the global and the local, the old and the new, the miniature and the monumental, *Top Goon* is an exemplary case of “creative insurgency” (Kraidy 2016).

Hybridity no longer being an ostensible and provocative theoretical standard-bearer does not signal the conceptual demise of hybridity. Rather, it underlines the success of the concept in becoming a latent instrument in media studies’ analytical toolkit. The turbulent world we live in, for better or worse, militates for the enduring necessity of hybridity, the analytical vocabulary in anchors, and the types of analysis it enables. A perfect storm of global developments—the contentious decade that has seen the Arab uprisings, the Occupy movement in the United States, *Podemos* in Spain and a motley crew of social movements, the rise of xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-minority rhetoric in the European Union and the United States, and the exploding movement of people fleeing war, hunger, and misery, particularly but not exclusively via the Mediterranean, not to mention the ongoing globalization of media industries—underscores the salience of hybridity as theory and method, not to mention its necessity as a moral discourse opposed to the specter of racial purity and political exclusion. Hybridity, in whatever guise it is invoked, remains a necessary antidote to stereotypes of identity and fantasies of homogeneity. As such, it is more salient than ever to media studies.