Hybridity

Kraidy, Marwan M.

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Hybridity is almost a good idea, but not quite.

—Nicholas Thomas

Hybridity is a risky notion. It comes without guarantees. Rather than a single idea or a unitary concept, hybridity is an association of ideas, concepts, and themes that at once reinforce and contradict each other. The varied and sometimes contradictory nature of its use points to the emptiness of employing hybridity as a universal description of culture. Indeed, we learn very little when we repeat glibly that every culture is hybrid or, as happens too often, when fragments of discourse or data are cobbled together and called hybridity in several registers—historical, rhetorical, existential, economic, and so on. It is therefore imperative to situate every analysis of hybridity in a specific context where the conditions that shape hybridities are addressed.

I hope that this book improves our understanding of the role of communication in the making of hybridities. Communication practices as varied as journalism (Chapter Four), media production (Chapter Five), and media reception (Chapter Six) create hybridity as a notion, an ideology, or an existential experience. Social agents with a variety of motivations and objectives muster communication processes to articulate versions of hybridity that suit their purposes. In colonial Mexico, postcolonial Lebanon, neocolonial Washington, and elsewhere, hybridity comes in different guises and with different effects.

The challenge before us is therefore not to come up with an all-purpose, final definition of hybridity, but to find a way to integrate different types of hybridity in a framework that makes the connections between these types both intelligible and usable. With that goal in mind, I have shaped this book as a reclamation of a critical and historically informed approach to international communication. After dissecting the deficiencies of the cultural imperialism thesis and its would-be substitute “cultural globalization,” I propound critical transculturalism as a new international communication framework with issues of hybridity at its
core. The usage of the word “transculturalism,” to be fully explained in the next chapter, conveys a synthetic notion of culture and a dynamic understanding of relations between cultures. As I conceive it, critical transculturalism is at once an engagement with hybridity as a discursive formation, a framework for international communication theory, and an agenda for research.

This book lends support to three general observations that underlie critical transculturalism:

1. Hybridity must be understood historically in a triple context: (a) the development of vocabularies of racial and cultural mixture from the mid-nineteenth century onward; (b) the historical basis of contemporary hybrid identities; and (c) the juncture at which the language of hybridity entered the study of international communication. The first issue is dealt with at length in Chapter Three, and at this point it suffices to remark that discourses of cultural mixture have historically served ideologies of integration and control—not pluralism and empowerment. Chapter Six tackles the second issue, namely, how local history bears upon present-day hybrid identities, which, I contend, should not be viewed as primordial, because ethnic and cultural identities have a strong relational component. The third issue, namely, the timing of the entrance of hybridity into international communication studies and its position vis-à-vis “cultural imperialism” and “cultural globalization,” is worth our attention. The discourse of hybridity connects two literatures: anti-“cultural imperialism” and pro-“cultural globalization” writings. Hybridity has emerged as the conceptual linchpin of the latter literature. As this book documents, the thoroughly demonized cultural imperialism thesis is giving way to a benign vision of global cultural diversity, local cultural resistance, and cross-cultural fusion. This cultural pluralism is in my view an inadequate vision for international communication and culture because it ignores power.

2. Hybridity must be understood as a rhetorical notion. This entails comprehension of (a) uses of hybridity in mainstream public discourse, a task that Chapter Four addresses; and (b) the analysis of the advent of hybridity in international communication studies for its rhetorical aspects. If, conceptually, hybridity is invoked in writings unsympathetic to critical approaches to international communication, rhetorically, hybridity facilitates a broader negation
of power in public treatments of intercultural relations. Hybridity, then, may be better understood, following Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek’s research on whiteness (1995), as a strategic rhetoric. Whiteness, the two U.S.-based rhetorical scholars wrote, "garners its representational power through its ability to be many things at once, to be universal and particular, to be a source of identity and difference” (p. 302). A similar fluidity and polyvalence imbue hybridity with persuasive power. A strategic rhetoric of hybridity frames hybridity as natural, commonplace, and desirable in intercultural relations, and therefore noncontentious. It is one aspect of globalization that represents the whole as egalitarian exchange and positive change. In this respect hybridity is a metonym for globalization.

3. The concept of hybridity must be “operationalized” in case studies. As an emergent phenomenon that eludes easy classification, hybridity poses a challenge to empirical research on media reception and to analyses of media texts. In the first case, there is tension between hybridity’s challenge to fixed categories and empirical research’s reliance on more-or-less stable classifications. The contrapuntal approach that I posit in Chapter One and execute empirically in Chapter Six is helpful in that regard, but we need to move beyond the merely contrapuntal in order to make hybridity empirically intelligible. As far as textual analysis is concerned, as we see in Chapter Five, intertextual excess and aesthetic eclecticism mark hybrid media texts and introduce an element of arbitrariness to their analysis. Both empirical and textual approaches to hybridity must therefore be situated in a context whose structural elements ought to be explained. The Mexican and Lebanese case studies in Chapters Five and Six substantiate the usefulness of anchoring analyses of cultural hybridity in politico-economic considerations. Nonetheless, there needs to be further methodological experimentation and development in order effectively to integrate hybridity’s historical, rhetorical, structural, textual, and empirical dimensions in concrete research studies.

In formulating critical transculturalism, I propose steps toward the full integration of historical, rhetorical, and empirical aspects of hybridity in international communication theory and research. I also explore how analysis of communication processes can improve our understanding of hybridity.
Chapter One maps the connections that already exist between hybridity and communication, and sets the stage for new links to be established throughout the book. After describing the rise to prominence of the notion of hybridity in academic and popular discourses, I give a brief etymological exposé of terms used to denote cultural mixture, whose historical development is further discussed in Chapter Three. Then Chapter One turns to a review of approaches to international communication that have mentioned or engaged the notion of hybridity, and to forecast this book’s contributions to this debate.

Chapter Two, “Scenarios of Global Culture,” surveys various perspectives on global culture. After a critique of analytical dichotomies in the study of intercultural relations, it focuses on the connections between, on one hand, “cultural imperialism” and “active audience” theories in media research, and, on the other hand, the debate on global culture. A discussion of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) controversy ensues, in which I highlight the main issues and summarize the historical evolution of this so-called global media debate from its early focus on nation-states to the later shift to transnational corporations and finally the emergence of human rights and public sphere perspectives. I then describe critiques of the cultural imperialism approach and offer my own take on them by way of a comparative analysis of the fields of American studies and international communication, which leads me to revisit some core assumptions of North American mass communication research. The chapter then turns to an analysis of the shift from “cultural imperialism” to “cultural globalization” and appraises the implications of that change of direction, since this is when media scholars began using the concept of hybridity.

Chapter Three, “The Trails and Tales of Hybridity,” is a multidisciplinary and comparative examination of the applications and critiques of hybridity and equivalent concepts such as syncretism, creolization, mestizaje, métissage, transculturation, and others. The chapter also surveys literary and especially postcolonial theory and its various approaches to hybridity. Beyond Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and Homi Bhabha (1994), who are credited with taking the concept of hybridity from biology to language and culture, I introduce other writers whose discipline, language, or geographical location may have left them underappreciated in Anglophone studies of hybridity.

Afterward, I explore how hybridity can describe two levels of sociocultural transformation by way of a contrast between the “culture of
covering” among radio disc jockeys in post–World War II Italy and the breaking of the Hawaiian taboo system in the wake of Captain Cook’s arrival in the Polynesian archipelago. These case studies represent two kinds of hybridity, the former superficial and historically inconsequential, the latter deeply rooted and of epochal significance. They demonstrate that hybridity is of dubious usefulness if employed as a broad conceptual umbrella without concrete historical, geographical, and conceptual grounding.

Indeed, some authors do consider hybridity to be basically useless, and their arguments are given voice in the latter section of Chapter Three. While this “antihybridity backlash” points to some weaknesses in hybridity theory, it largely consists of unconstructive criticism. A more productive corrective to some excesses of hybridity theory can be found in the debate between the African formation of nègritude and the Caribbean movement of Créolité. Both nègritude and Créolité are Francophone, interested in Africa and its extensions, and concerned with postcolonial racial and cultural issues. Nonetheless, there are deep differences between the two movements over the ideological implications of hybridity. The significance of the dispute between nègritude and Créolité overflows the debate’s initial geographical and historical boundaries, because it reflects different interpretations of the connection between hybridity and power.

In search of continuities and discontinuities among mestizaje, métissage, Créolité, creolization, and transculturation, Chapter Four, “Corporate Transculturalism,” examines how hybridity is used in contemporary public discourse. Via critical discourse analysis, I examine uses of hybridity in (mostly) U.S. newspapers, magazines, and trade books. These include a series of articles on global popular culture published by the Washington Post in 1998; The Global Me (Zachary, 2000), a trade book that focuses on hybridity as a commercial asset for multinational corporations; and Creative Destruction (Cowen, 2002a), an economic analysis of global culture. The Washington Post articles invoke hybridity as a characteristic of intercultural relations and use it to describe how audiences in developing countries interact with American popular culture. Chapter Four grapples with these questions: How does public discourse use hybridity to frame global culture? Does it account for global politico-economic structures? Or does the use of hybridity in public discourse reproduce hegemonic cultural relations, consisting of what Indian-born postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) called “hybridist post-national talk, celebrating globalization as
Americanization” (p. 361)? I find that these publications associate hybridity with assumptions about the benefits of globalization, free trade, and individual consumer freedom, in effect expressing what I call “corporate transculturalism,” hence the title of the chapter.

Chapter Five explores what can be called hybrid media texts that result from industry practices such as coproduction, format adaptation, and localization. The chapter’s title, “The Cultural and Political Economies of Hybrid Media Texts,” reflects the importance of the politico-economic context in which hybrid media programs are created and consumed. This chapter tackles the following questions: How do the structural features of the global and national media industries shape hybrid media texts? What motivates media companies to undertake what have been called post-Fordist practices such as coproduction and adaptation? Finally, how can the concept of hybridity be effectively used to analyze these practices and the media texts they create? After brief comments on post-Fordism, MTV’s localization strategy, and British television export policies, the bulk of the chapter is devoted to an intriguing case study: the 1999 production and broadcast by Mexican TV Azteca of Tele Chobis, a copycat version of the original British Teletubbies. By way of a textual and semiotic analysis of several episodes of the program, I examine the structural forces—political, economic, regulatory, and legal—that mold Tele Chobis’s hybridity. These include the liberalization of Mexico’s economy, the current international copyright regime, and fierce competition between TV Azteca and Televisa in a changing media landscape.

Grounded in an ethnographic research project with mostly middle-class Christian Maronite Lebanese youth that began in 1993, Chapter Six, “Structure, Reception, and Identity: On Arab-Western Dialogism,” examines how hybridity is constituted by young Maronites in Lebanon in relation to Arab and Western worldviews. At the heart of Chapter Six is an analysis of the links between audience interpretations of media content and the structures of media policy and ownership. This chapter’s crucial function, therefore, is to examine hybridity at the empirical level. For young Maronites, identity construction takes place in everyday life practices of nomadism, mimicry, and consumption. In the process, they are attracted by hybrid—especially local—cultural texts. To probe the links between cultural reception and the structure of the Lebanese media, I analyze two “master texts”—a local television series and the lyrics of a local artist-musician-songwriter—both with dominant hybrid components and both highly popular with my respondents despite their
carrying ideologies that oppose traditional Maronite sensibilities (the two texts were not preselected; I arrived at them by way of interviews and participant observation). This lack of correspondence between audience readings, cultural texts, and media ownership raises provocative questions about theory and policy, which are briefly addressed in Chapter Six and elaborated on in Chapter Seven.

The book’s conclusion, Chapter Seven, “Hybridity without Guarantees: Toward Critical Transculturalism,” proposes critical transculturalism as a new international communication framework. Because of the openness of discursive formations, hybridity can be appropriated as a strategic rhetoric (Nakayama and Krízek, 1995), aiming in part to become a leading theory not only in international communication but also in the study of the cultural dimensions of globalization. I therefore argue that hybridity is the cultural logic of globalization—hence the title of this book\(^1\)—whose comprehension requires a relational, processual, and contextual approach to hybridity from a critical perspective. This entails that we ought to begin looking at hybridities, each as a particular, localized practice, as opposed to a singular hybridity conceived as an all-inclusive sociocultural order. Hence my call for “Shifting Geertz,” in reference to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, by which I mean a renewed emphasis on local knowledge where the notion of the local is reconsidered, followed by reflections on the implications of hybridity for media policy. Contra hybridity as the cultural logic of globalization, this book envisions, by way of critical transculturalism, a hybridity without guarantees.\(^2\)