I consider the social science study of syncretism to be crucially about the various discourses that seek to control the definition of syncretism.

—Charles Stewart

[C]reolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity...are...rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.

—Paul Gilroy

Speaking with virtually mindless pleasure of transnational cultural hybridity, and of politics of contingency, amounts, in effect, to endorsing the cultural claims of transnational capital itself.

—Aijaz Ahmad

Contemporary writing on globalization and culture suggests the demise of the modern notion of a universal culture, in both its utopian and dystopian varieties. Both the French Enlightenment vision of a universal civilization predicated on human rights, scientific rationalism, and material progress (the utopian version) and the Romantic German notion of an authentic national culture threatened by the spread of soulless global forms (the dystopian variant) are outdated. Taking their place is a growing consensus in the social and human sciences that global culture is hybrid, mixing heterogeneous elements into recombinant forms. This position is more akin to the metaphor of polyglot ancient Babel than to the civilisation of French rationalism or the Kultur of German romanticism. It is skeptical of claims that foreign influence eradicates local traditions, and at the same time it is ambivalent toward the notion of local resilience. Its call for “openness” opposes notions of “delinking” originated by Egyptian political economist Samir Amin and taken up by Dutch international communication scholar Cees Hamelink (1983), who sees delinking as the only way for nations to avoid “cultural synchronization” (p. 22). In contrast, anthropologists have argued, at least since U.S. anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and Clifford Geertz, against a direct correspondence between economics and culture.1
There is growing recognition that hybridity is a prima facie global condition caused by voluntary and forced migration, wars, invasions, slavery, intermarriages, and trade. Mexican American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1996) opposes the idea of the New World Order with the notion of the New World Border. Instead of a monocentric homogenization, Gómez-Peña sees a hybrid transnational culture where “Spanglish, Franglés, and Gringónol are *linguas francas*” (p. 7) are the norm, and where the only resistance comes from a reactionary minority of purity advocates. Even materialist anticolonial critic Aijaz Ahmad, who is no fan of hybridity talk, echoes Gómez-Peña when he writes that the “cross-fertilization of cultures has been endemic to all movements of people” (1995, p. 18). Chicano critical anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1995) reflects the widespread recognition that hybridity is a master trope in cultural formations when he writes that “instead of hybridity versus plurality, . . . it is hybridity all the way down” (p. xv). While recognition of the hybrid fabric of global culture is inevitable, it should not harden the variegated elements of hybridity into a definite and therefore fossilized discourse, but should serve as a point of departure for renewed scrutiny of the conditions and bases of hybridity.

The contemporaneous salience of hybridity should not obscure the long history of intercultural borrowing and fusion. In English-speaking theory circles, Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and Indian American postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha (1994) are often credited with dislocating the concept of hybridity from the biological domain of miscegenation to the cultural field of power. In the interdisciplinary social sciences, Argentinian-Mexican cultural critic Néstor García-Canclini (1989) articulated the most systematic treatment of cultural hybridity, grounded in Latin American politics and culture. For decades, however, writers, scientists, and ideologues across the world have developed concepts such as syncretism, *mestizaje*, and creolization to capture cultural mixture. Bhabha’s conception of hybridity in cultural politics and García-Canclini’s articulation of cultural hybridity with political culture actually stand on the shoulders of various European, Latin American, and other thinkers, going as far back as the eighteenth-century French mathematician, naturalist, and racialist theorist George Buffon and the late nineteenth-century liberal Berlin School of Ethnology directed by Rudolf Virchow and Adolf Bastian. My approach to hybridity will therefore be both historicist, grounding theories in their sociohistorical circumstances, and comparative, drawing on a global and multidisciplinary literature.
In Old World Encounters: Cross-cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-modern Times, U.S.-based historian Jerry Bentley (1993) asserts that “cross-cultural encounters have been a regular feature of world history since the earliest days of the human species’ existence” (p. vii). Beyond the de facto recognition by theorists of contemporary culture that cultural hybridity is a historical reality, Bentley demonstrates it in an encyclopedic array of historical case studies of cultural hybridity that range from South America to China. For instance, Bentley explains that Islam spread rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa because local elites converted voluntarily to enhance trade with Muslim merchants and because Islam was the dominant mode of sociopolitical organization of the world that surrounded sub-Saharan Africa. Also, rulers and the elite were motivated to convert to Islam because the recognition by powerful Islamic states to the north and east strengthened their local power and prestige. Hence Islam’s successful expansion out of its original territory of Arabia and its dominant commingling with local traditions in Africa. Bentley also relates the syncretic practices of the Manicheans who migrated from Central Asia to China and integrated Daoist and Buddhist communities in the seventh century. These were a few among many historical episodes of mutual cultural appropriation of vocabularies and symbols. Indeed, Bentley’s entire book is an exploration of hybridity in the longue durée, charting the trajectory of cultural mixture in world history.

Historicizing the terms used to represent cultural mixture is an essential prerequisite for engaging the politically charged and conceptually unstable trope of hybridity. Knowledge of how the notion of hybridity and its antecedents emerged, developed, and mutated is crucial for a diachronic comprehension of cross-cultural encounters. Most importantly for a critical theory of hybridity, a foregrounding of the historical trajectory of terms of cultural mixture can help illuminate the role of power in the transcultural processes that weave the hybrid fabric of transnational culture. This entails the following questions: What is the historical trajectory of the vocabulary of cultural mixture? What are the conceptual and terminological antecedents of hybridity? What are the historical factors at play in the adoption and contestation of this controversial concept? More importantly, how have terms of cultural mixture defined the world in which they were deployed? Addressing these questions paves the way for the elaboration in the final chapter of the notion of critical transculturalism, based on a communication-driven process of hybridization.
Miscegenation: Hybridity and Biology

The modern debate on hybridity emerged in the eighteenth century in the context of interracial contact that resulted from overseas conquest and population displacement in Britain, France, and the United States. For example, French racialist theory developed during the Siècle des Lumières, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its progressive principles that catalyzed the French Revolution. Puzzlement is a natural first reaction when one considers that emancipatory discourses of rationalism, human rights, and political equality went in tandem with racialist theories of European superiority. One of the least known of these theorists is Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, known as Buffon, a friend of Denis Diderot, the French Enlightenment author who supervised the writing of the Encyclopédie. At the heart of Buffon’s theory of race, developed during the 1740s at the conclusion of several works on natural history and the animal world, is the premise that all humans are part of one species, and that different races are individuated subgroups of that common species. Individuation occurs as an evolutionary reaction to environmental constraints. Hence Buffon’s infamous theory that Africans’ black skin is a protective measure against extreme heat. Processes of individuation, however, correspond to a hierarchy among the races, whose top and bottom are occupied by white Europeans and the indigenous peoples of America and Australia respectively, while the middle positions are filled by Africans and Asians (Toumson, 1998).

One derivative of Buffon’s theory, unimportant at the time but decisive in the development of subsequent racialist theory, is that since all races are part of the same species, sexual unions between individuals from different races lead to procreation. Unlike Buffon, Joseph Ernest Renan, French historian and theorist of nationalism and collective identities avant la lettre, believed that human races were actually different species. However, both French racial theorists elevated white Europeans to the top of the hierarchy, but Renan demoted black Africans to the bottom of the hierarchy, which they shared with Native Americans and Australians. It logically followed that the mixing of races would lead to the degeneration of superior races.3

Grounded in pseudo-scientific concepts of anatomy and craniometry, these early speculations on the hybrid were chiefly concerned with the contamination of white Europeans by the races they colonized. Differences of opinion on the vitality of hybrids, oscillating between “hybrid sterility,” which was the initial consensus perspective, and
“hybrid vigor,” were overshadowed by ideologies of racial superior-
ity that warned of the danger of “miscegenation.” A typical argument
in that debate can be found in the writing of the Edinburgh racial
theorist Robert Knox (1850) who argued that hybridity was “a degra-
dation of humanity and . . . was rejected by nature” (p. 497, quoted in
Young, 1995, p. 15) and found its literary counterpart in what Kipling
described as the “monstrous hybridism of East and West” (1901, p. 341,
quoted in Young, 1995, p. 3). This early hybridity discourse was symp-
tomatic of the Enlightenment’s failure, despite its otherwise progressive
agenda, to come to terms with its racist underside, a dereliction manifest
most clearly in the refusal of most Enlightenment thinkers to condemn
slavery.

Syncretism: Hybridity and Religion

In the first century AD, the Greek philosopher Plutarch coined the word
“syncretism” to describe the union of hitherto separated peoples of Crete
to confront external enemies (sunkrtismos means “union”) (Moreau,
2000; Stewart, 1999), and the Renaissance humanist Erasmus (1466–
1536) later used “syncretism” to refer to the fusion of divergent ideas.
Since the seventeenth century, syncretism has served as a framework for
the study of interreligious borrowing and intrareligious fusion (Moreau,
2000). In a seminal article titled “Zum Verständnis des Synkretismus”
(translated as “On Understanding Syncretism” [Baines, 1999a]), German
Egyptologist Hans Bonnet (Baines, 1999a) laid the foundations for the
modern study of syncretism. Bonnet believed that the tendency toward
syncretism was a fundamental dimension of polytheistic Egyptian reli-
gion, characterized by “the fusion of names of Egyptian deities” (Baines,
1999b, p. 204). Ancient Egyptians, according to Bonnet, resorted to syn-
cretism in order to manage polytheism, using syncretism as a framework
for theological unity. Though central to Egyptian religion, syncretism
was “double-sided” not only in its “nature” but also in its “effects”
(p. 198), since syncretism advanced Egyptian religion to its peak through
the integration of various deities and ideas, but also precipitated its
decline by causing fatal fragmentation. Bonnet’s insights have histori-
cal value, but their applicability is limited because of his focus on reli-
gious syncretism within one sociocultural system, and also due to his
ideational focus on religious thought more than on syncretism’s social
and political bearings (see Baines, 1999b, for more on this issue). It is
in Christianity, especially Catholicism, that the concept of syncretism
began to carry negative connotations, because it generally referred to the degree to which church doctrine was contaminated by nonchurch beliefs as Christianity entered new territories opened up by colonialism. Anthropologist Charles Stewart (1999) writes that “[s]yncretism became a term of abuse often applied to castigate colonial local churches that had burst out of the sphere of mission control and begun to ‘illegitimately’ indigenize Christianity instead of properly reproducing the European form of Christianity they had originally been offered” (p. 46). This issue remains a source of contention between the Vatican and Catholic churches in rural and predominantly indigenous southern Mexico, where local deacons tend to deviate from standard Catholic doctrine (Thompson, 2002). The deacons’ “special brand of evangelism, infused with the tenets of liberation theology as well as pre-Columbian symbols and songs,” has provoked the Vatican into ordering the Diocese of San Cristóbal in the state of Chiapas—where poverty among the rural and mostly indigenous population and its neglect by federal Mexican authorities led to the well-known Zapatista movement—not to ordain any deacons for at least five years. The letter issuing the order states that “the perceived danger is . . . sending an implicit message from the Holy See to other ecclesiastical groups for an ‘alternative’ church model that could seem convenient for ‘cultural situations and particular ethnic groups’” (Thompson, 2002, emphasis mine). Paradoxically, the letter’s content was widely circulated in Chiapas within the same week as the pope’s announcement of his plan to canonize the first Native Mexican (Indian) saint, Juan Diego, during a summer 2002 visit to Mexico. “Syncretism” thus refers to a border zone of tension between religious universalism and particularism.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, syncretism is still a salient concern of Christian churches and missionaries and a subject of debate in Christian publications such as the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. While some recent discussions have advocated abandoning the concept of syncretism because of its charged history and pejorative connotation (Schineller, 1992), others have relocated syncretism from its strictly theological dimension to the notion of inculturation—not to be confused with enculturation—defined as “the development of a response to the Gospel that is rooted in a specific time and place” (Schreiter, 1993, p. 50). This application of syncretism has expanded its scope from a strictly religious concern to include broader cultural processes of interest to anthropologists (Stewart, 1999), linguists (Blevins, 1995), and historians (Drell, 1999). The ensuing multiplicity of
meanings and uses heightens the importance of contextualizing the use of “syncretism,” as suggested by the Latin American experience with “mestizaje.”

Hybridity and the Nation: Mestizaje and Transculturation

In the wake of postimperial decolonization movements in the Americas, racial and cultural mixture emerged to the forefront of national policy. In the United States, the ideology of the melting pot was adopted as a nation-building strategy used to integrate ethnic difference. Across Latin America, states adopted mestizaje as the official ideology of nation building in their bids to forge national identities distinct from mere provincial status in the Spanish empire. As a Latin American “foundational theme” (Martínez-Echázabal, 1998), mestizaje was an attempt to mitigate tensions between the indigenous populations and the descendants of Spanish colonists by positing the new nations as hybrids of both worlds (see, for instance, Anderson, 1993; Archetti, 1999; Doremus, 2001; Hale, 1999; Mignolo, 2000). While the concept of mestizaje contains residual imperial relations, it has nonetheless helped scholars like Martín-Barbero (1993a, b), as explicated in Chapter One, to make sense of Latin American historical and sociocultural fusions. Nonetheless, some Afrocentric critics have attacked the concept of mestizaje, which they believe represents the erasure of the African black heritage in Latin America (Rosa, 1996).

Most historians of race and ethnicity in Latin America subscribe to a more complex understanding of constructions of racial mixture, one where race enters a volatile mix with gender, class, and nationalism (Bolke Turner and Turner, 1994; Doremus, 2001; Gruzinski, 1999; Hale, 1999; Kellogg, 2000; Martínez-Echazábal, 1998). This complexity has endowed “mestizaje” with different connotations compatible with various Latin American national experiences. Mexican history provides a genealogy of mestizaje as official state ideology. According to French historian Serge Gruzinski (1995), rulers in colonial Mexico deployed images to carry out “a policy of cultural mestizaje” (p. 53) that amounted to the Westernization and Christianization of Mexico’s indigenous population. In Gruzinski’s view, this was nothing short of a visual invasion of Mexico by a “Western imaginaire” that entailed a fundamental albeit subtle reorganization of the “humanist relationship to the real” (p. 56). On the ground, this was accomplished by enlisting artists whose work
created a baroque image that blended Catholic religious themes with native iconography, leading to the development of a “hybrid imagery” (p. 70) in the seventeenth century. The dark-skinned, barefooted Virgen de Guadalupe, now the patron saint of Mexico, was the ultimate syncretic icon, which, according to Gruzinski, connected native America to Christian Europe. The objective of this strategy was the creation of a stable Mexican identity that incorporated heterogenous elements. In Gruzinski’s opinion: “the miraculous image played a great role in unifying and homogenizing colonial society and its commingled cultures, mixing processions and official ceremonies with an inexhaustible series of popular entertainments and Indian dances” (p. 65).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Mexican intellectuals revived the mestizaje ideology at a crucial time, when Mexico was redefining itself as a new nation, mainly through the 1910–1921 Revolución. Book titles such as Los grandes problemas nacionales (Molina-Enríquez, 1909/1978) and Forjando patria (Gamio, 1916/1992) played up mestizaje as a central characteristic of Mexican identity. Most widely known was La raza cósmica (Vasconcelos, 1925/1997), whose author posits Mexico as a pioneering example of a hybrid cosmic race. Mostly concerned with the management of racial and ethnic difference for the purpose of national integration, this discourse had three interlocked implications. First, it switched the focus of mestizaje from biology to ethnicity culture. The second implication derives from the first: mestizaje is made easier to achieve since, relocating it to the less politicized realm of culture, it was no longer exclusively based in racial mixing. Third, it reclassified many indigenous people as mestizos, thus officially shrinking the size of the native community while swelling the number of mestizos (Doremus, 2001). The integrative dimension of mestizaje is enshrined in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City, where a precolonial pyramid, a colonial church, and a modern building stand contiguously, a record of the historical trajectory of Mexico as a hybrid nation, a mixture of its three cultures. This monument is in effect an outdoor museum in a metropolis whose museums García-Canclini (1989) analyzes as central to the creation of the Mexican nation through an exhibitive dialectic that arranges elements from the miniature (in museums) to the monumental in a cultural narrative of a mestizo nation. Elsewhere in Latin America, mestizaje takes on several connotations and various levels of complexity as it is situated within the historical peculiarities of nations like Cuba (Martínez-Echazábal, 1998), Guatemala (Hale, 1999), Paraguay (Bolke Turner and Turner, 1994). In most of these nations, mestizaje is a deeply
racialized discourse whose progressive surface has a reactionary undertow.

The notion of transculturation came forth in Cuba and Brazil in the mid-1930s and early 1940s as a variant of mestizaje. Cuban legal scholar and cultural critic Fernando Ortiz (1940/1995)—not to be confused with the Brazilian scholar Renato Ortiz, who still writes today on national identity and culture—developed the notion of transculturation to understand Cuba’s experience with racial and cultural encounters, while Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1936/1986) used it to explain racial and class dynamics in his country. Transculturation entails “a kind of brokerage, an exchange, a give-and-take, a process whereby both parts of the cultural equation are modified and give way to a new socio-cultural conglomerate” (Martínez-Echával, 1998) and is thus different from both acculturation and assimilation. Contra prevailing ideologies of cultural purity represented by conservative Cuban critic Sánchez de Fuente, Fernando Ortiz posited the African element at the heart of scholarly inquiry and public debate on Cuban national identity. He asserted that it was inevitable that Cuban culture would be mixed, an argument he fleshed out in his analysis of mixed Cuban musical forms (Boggs, 1991; Ortiz, 1952).

More recently, “transculturation” was appropriated to denote cultural mixture in literature and music. In conjunction with the Russian culturalist school, a circle of humanities scholars dedicated to the study of cultural interactions following Mikhail Bakhtin, transculture is used to understand “the Western postmodern condition” (Berry and Epstein, 1999, p. 79) by resolving the contradiction between multiculturalism’s push for communal identities and deconstruction’s imperative to excavate internal differences in identity. In other contexts transculturation describes emerging forms of “world music” (Wallis and Malm, 1990) and literary renditions of colonial encounters (Pratt, 1992). Clearly, transculturation has not escaped the multiplicity of meanings and applications that riddled its predecessors.

Like mestizaje, however, transculturation was an integrative discourse in sync with the interests of dominant strata of Latin American societies. By displacing mixture from race to culture, and by selectively welcoming and rejecting native traditions, Latin American ideologists of mestizaje (and transculturation) saw institutionalized cultural mixture as a sure way to effect the slow decay of precolonial cultures and integrate them in the dominant society, which welcomed their non-threatening arts, crafts, and selected rituals, while imposing on them the
Spanish or Portuguese language, the Catholic faith, and colonial political and social organization. As a discourse that recognizes, even celebrates, cultural difference, mestizaje in effect is a tool for “bleaching” all but the most benign practices that gave precolonial natives their identities. Cultural mixture within the emerging nation-states thus obeyed a residual colonial logic.

In contrast to mestizaje’s ostensible recognition of diversity in the context of ideologies of integration in the emerging Latin American nation-states, current conceptions view hybridity as a progressive citizenly discourse (Gómez-Peña, 1996; Joseph and Fink, 1999; Werbner and Modood, 1997). According to performance studies scholar May Joseph (1999), hybridity can be an anti-imperialist, participatory discourse of cultural citizenship. As a “democratic expression of multiple affiliations” (Joseph, 1999, p. 2), hybrid identity can be asserted for political—used here in its strict meaning of institutions and practices of governance—advantage. This multiplicity of links between citizens and cultural identities can, in the view of British-based social anthropologist Pnina Werbner, be an effective counterweight to xenophobic forces. If hybridity is understood as a “theoretical metaconstruction of social order” (Werbner, 1997, p. 1), its political potential lies in its ability to subvert binary categories.

In distinction from the interpretive approach of performance studies scholars and sociologists, some political theorists have applied a normative framework to intercultural relations within the nation-state. Though in general these writers have not focused on cultural mixture, Turkish American scholar Seyla Benhabib (2002) explicitly discusses the notion of hybridity as she teases out aspects of a citizenly discourse premised on fluid cultural identities. Indeed, in The Claims of Culture (2002) Benhabib argues against the “faulty epistemic premises” of the holistic conception of cultures and advocates instead “recognition of the radical hybridity and polyvocality of all cultures” (p. 4). Cultures, she argues “are not holistic but . . . multilayered, decentered and fractured systems of action and signification” (p. 25). In contradistinction to scholars who have used hybridity as a metadescriptional device and in contrast to those for whom hybridity is an assertion of resilient localism, Benhabib seeks to reconcile universalist ideals of equality with relativist manifestations of identity. To come to terms with this global-local tension, Benhabib puts forth normative rules that in her opinion enable us to use cultural hybridity as a practicable aspect of citizenship.
Three normative requisites, in Benhabib’s view (2002), enable societies at once to recognize hybrid identities and to be compatible with universally acknowledged human rights and democratic standards. These conditions are (1) egalitarian reciprocity, (2) voluntary self-ascription, and (3) freedom of exit or association. The first normative condition calls for equal rights for all communities, including minorities. Voluntary self-ascription entails that membership in a group must be through self-identification, not through an inflexible system that traps individuals in irreversible birth identities, hence the third rule, which guarantees the ability of individuals to affiliate with groups they were not born in. When these conditions are secured, pluralistic societies can engage in what Benhabib calls “complex cultural dialogues” (p. 22), an egalitarian process of exchange that leads to mutual transformation of its participants. This idea lies at the heart of Benhabib’s invitation to political theorists to consider identity groups as complex and dynamic movements whose political outlook is not predetermined by their ethnicity, religion, or race.

For complex cultural dialogues to have concrete effects, Benhabib (2002) advocates “a legal pluralism that would countenance a coexistence of jurisdictional systems for different cultural and religious traditions and accept varieties of institutional design for societies with strong ethnic, cultural, and linguistic cleavages” (p. 19). For hybridity to be a bona fide progressive citizenly discourse, then, the state has to play an active role in its legislative, regulatory, and juridical institutions. Even though recognition of fluid identities by the state remains controversial, as the wrangling surrounding the “multiracial” categories in the 2000 U.S. Census demonstrates, I believe that Benhabib proposes a valid and usable scheme for the actual usefulness of hybridity in politics. Therefore, in Chapter Seven, I draw on Benhabib’s framework in my discussion of how media policy can integrate, at the normative level, a positive notion of hybridity in communication processes.

Hybridity, Language, and Culture: Creolization

The concept of creolization (Chaudenson, 1992; Jourdan, 1991; Valdman, 1978) shares the historical trajectory of mestizaje and transculturation. Like them, it came to life in the wake of European colonialism in the New World and has now diffused into a few distinct usages linked by a shared history of political and cultural struggles with Europe’s empires.
The term “creole” stems from the Portuguese crioulo or the Spanish criollo. Criaπ is the Spanish verb “to raise” or “to breed,” deriving from the Latin creare, “to create.” Initially describing African slaves relocated on the American continent (Stewart, 1999), “Creole” came to connote someone “born in the country” (Toumson, 1998, p. 120), in reference to those people born in Europe’s colonial possessions. In anthropologist Charles Stewart’s words, “creolization” reflected “a connection between New World birth and deculturation” (1999, p. 44). As we will briefly see, the term has carried a variety of meanings linked to geography, race, culture, and language.

In his now famous treatise on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1993) devotes a chapter to what he calls the “Creole pioneers” who led the establishment of nationalism on the American continent and the states it created. In Anderson’s view, they were all Creole states, because they were “formed and led by people who shared a common language and a common descent with those against whom they fought” (p. 47). One of the most interesting dimensions of Latin American creolism as explicated by Anderson is that it was in fact the source of a movement of national coalescence and unity, a centripetal force of homogenization whose project was the establishment of independent nation-states. Remarkably, according to Anderson, Creole communities developed a national awareness “well before most of Europe” (p. 50, emphasis in original). They gravitated toward republicanism and, with the temporary exception of Brazil, did not replicate the royal dynastic systems of the Old Continent. Anderson’s definition of “Creole” is based on birthplace, where a common identity derives from “the shared fatality of extra-Spanish birth” (p. 63).

Whereas in Anderson’s usage, creolism is the social equivalent of mestizaje, in the United States creolism is associated with the state of Louisiana, a place whose confluence of British, French, and African elements has received significant scholarly attention (Domínguez, 1986; Chaudenson, 1992; Henry and Bankston, 1998). Advocates of a structural approach to the phenomenon propose four dimensions of creole identity: “birthplace, ancestry and race and culture” (Henry and Bankston, 1998, p. 560). In this analysis, a Creole was historically born in colonial territories from parents born away. Race and culture, which are collapsed as one dimension, was a less straightforward issue because it had diametrically opposed meanings for whites and blacks. For the former, Creole meant white purity and elite political and socioeconomic status, while for the latter it denoted racial mixture and a subordinate
social position. A more revealing difference is that whites understood creolism to be indicative of purity, while for blacks it was “a matter of continuum” (Henry and Bankston, 1998, p. 563).

The multiple usages of “creolization,” like those of other terms of cultural mixture like “syncretism,” “mestizaje,” and “hybridity,” has led to a confusing situation where the expanding scope of the concept dilutes its meaning. The term’s numerous meanings hark back to the middle of the twentieth century (see Arron, 1951), and more than five decades later it is a source of confusion. In present-day Louisiana, the label “Creole” has been appropriated by the touristic and culinary sectors. In academic parlance, “creolization” oftentimes refers to cultural mixture at large, a usage mostly visible in Ulf Hannerz’s (1987) advocacy of creolization as “our most promising root metaphor” (p. 551). The term has been also used to refer to mixed musical styles and genres (Salamone, 1998) and retains an association with linguistics. However, creolization is a contested notion. Stewart (1999) criticizes Hannerz’s choice of creolization (1987) as reflecting a “general state of confusion in social science terminology” (p. 45). Stewart argues that the word “creolization,” like “hybridization” and “mongrelization,” is burdened with a colonial and biologistic weight, and is not therefore the salutary metaphor that Hannerz claims it to be. Similarly, Henry and Bankston (1998) recognize that “the accumulation of referents and shifts in meanings have made creole a multilayered term and dulled its effectiveness as an identifier” (p. 563). Seemingly oblivious to the semantic and conceptual slippage in the vocabulary of cultural mixture, the original term of mixture—“hybridity”—has enjoyed a vigorous renascence in postcolonial theory.

**Hybridity and Postcolonial Theory**

The postcolonial turn took up hybridity as a central dimension of the literary and cultural productions of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and diasporas in the West. Standing on the shoulders of the disciplines that debated syncretism, mestizaje, and creolization, postcolonial theory repopularized the term “hybridity” to explicate cultural fusion. British sociologist Paul Gilroy cast *The Black Atlantic*, his book about the history of demographic and ideological movements between Europe, Africa, and the Americas (1993), as “an essay about the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas” (p. xi). Conceptualizing the “Black Atlantic” as a “counterculture of modernity,” Gilroy examines the transatlantic flows of people, ideas, and culture that began with the slave trade,
arguing that it has been significant for cultural renewal in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and America. Gilroy argues against what—after Sollors (1986)—he calls “cultural insiderism” (p. 3), or the various forms of ethnic essentialism and nationalism that expound ethnicity and identity as immutable categories set against markers of Otherness in binary oppositions such as black versus white. Recognizing “the tragic popularity” (p. 7) of notions of cultural purity, which usually couple an emphatic assertion of identity with an equally strong rejection of difference, Gilroy argues for an alternative and more challenging understanding of intercultural contact, “the theorization of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity” (p. 2), which he initiates with the image of the ship. As a moving object, the ship symbolizes the trajectory between point of departure and destination, a liminal in-between that captures the spirit of the “Black Atlantic.” As a carrier of people, a ship also represents the idea that entire life worlds can be in motion, such as is the case for the myriad experience of forced, semi-forced, and voluntary migrations that are a hallmark of the modern, hybrid world.

While Gilroy focuses on narratives of the historical entanglement of Europe, Africa, and America, Bhabha (1994) explores hybridity in the context of the postcolonial novel and celebrates it as a symptom of resistance by the colonized, as the contamination of imperial ideology, aesthetics, and identity by natives striking back at colonial domination. He emphasizes hybridity’s ability to subvert dominant discourses and reappropriate them to create what he calls “cultures of postcolonial contra-modernity” (p. 6, emphasis in original). This reinscription is found in Bhabha’s analysis of mimicry as a hybridizing process. “Mimicry,” Bhabha argues, “emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.” As a result, mimicry “appropriates” the other as it visualizes power” (p. 86). As a process of cultural repetition rather than representation, mimicry undermines the authority of colonial representation because it brings to light the ambivalence of colonial discourse. As such, according to Bhabha, it opens up a space for alternative forms of agency by highlighting colonial culture’s “insurgent counter-appeal” (p. 91). The cultural hybridity enacted in mimicry, best captured by Bhabha’s notion of “third space,” is thus understood as a subversive practice of resistance. It is this highly textualist formulation of hybridity as resistance that has subjected Bhabha to critiques of poststructuralist license and a lack of sensitivity to the material inequalities that riddle the previously colonized world.

Homi Bhabha’s fervent embrace differs sharply from Edward Said’s increasingly ambivalent engagement with hybridity. Between the
Palestinian American scholar’s magnum opus, *Orientalism* (1978), and his other major work, *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), unfolds an increasingly explicit recognition of hybridity as a fundamental dimension of intercultural relations, albeit a hybridity that is firmly grounded in imperial dynamics. This is a major shift between the two books, one of many changes that, according to Tanzanian-British scholar Bart Moore-Gilbert (1997), warrant a distinction between an early and a late Said. The early Said (1978) draws on Michel Foucault’s conception of discourse and Antonio Gramsci’s view of hegemony to argue that the political, military, and economic drives of empire go in tandem with a discursive regime that compels, supports, justifies, even ennobles—and ultimately underscores the inevitability of—colonialism and imperialism. This discourse, which he calls Orientalism, can be encountered not only in the West’s relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds, Said’s initial locus of analysis, but in any locale touched by Western conquest.

Drawing on a vast cornucopia of fiction, scholarship, and public discourse, Said (1978) paints a veritable discursive machine dedicated to making the non-West a subordinate Other. In the early Said’s view, the will to dominate that animates much of Western narrative production about the non-West is concretized in the dichotomy the West establishes between itself and the rest of the world. It is a binary opposition in which the former is granted the upper hand in nearly all realms of life: morality, religion, justice, science, customs, and traditions. The imperial West, which in *Orientalism* concretely means Britain, France, and the United States, is largely oblivious to attempts to resist its discursive grip. It is this last aspect of Said’s argument that made him a target of detractors who pointed out that he was articulating a totalistic logic, representing the West exactly as he claims it has represented the East. In *Orientalism*, the West and the Rest are separated by a wall of prejudice and suspicion, largely of the West’s making. Herein resides the significance of Said’s shift between *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). Unlike the former’s portrayal of an unbridgeable gap between West and East, the latter is replete with endorsements of interaction and exchange. On this register, the late Said is unequivocal and persistent. Early in *Culture and Imperialism* the author credited with starting postcolonialism writes that “all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (1994, p. xxv). Some pages later, Said reiterates that “we have never before been as aware as we now are of how oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how they partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross
national boundaries, defy the police action of simple dogma and loud patriotism. Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more foreign elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude” (p. 15, emphasis in original).

Said understands that this entanglement is the result of imperial conquest and the various processes of accommodation, appropriation, and resistance triggered by colonialism and imperialism. However, unlike Orientalism, Culture and Imperialism accounts for indigenous, non-Western literary and cultural creativity. The late Said (1994) also exhibits a stronger appreciation for resistance to domination, even arguing that, in the long run, colonialism and imperialism can be defeated by those who suffer under them. In doing that Said moves further from Foucault’s conception of dominance in history—from whom he had already distanced himself in The World, the Text, and the Critic (1984)—and moves closer to Gramsci’s more optimistic outlook as to the potential of resistance. Said’s often stated commitment to a universal humanism leads him in his later work to a more hopeful outlook manifest in his recognition of hybridity and mutual reliance, nonetheless without abandoning his focus on power and domination.

Hybridity and Sociocultural Transformation

The hybridizing processes that pervade human history have created uneven cultural mixtures, some superficial and others significant enough to shake a society’s cultural foundations. The reception of U.S. music in post–World War II Italy is an example of the former. After American soldiers brought their music with them to Europe in the 1940s, disc jockeys changed the names of U.S. singers to mitigate the sense of otherness many Italians felt toward American popular culture. To make them more Italian sounding, “Louis Armstrong became Luigi Braccioforte, Benny Goodman was Beniamino Buonomo, Hoagy Carmichael turned into Carmelito, Duke Ellington became Del Duca, Coleman Hawkins was Coléma” (Minganti, 2000, p. 151). Historians call this phenomenon “covering,” which evolved in more than mere name changing. Covering combined imitation and mitigation, admiration and derision, and was mocked by some Italians as a pathetic imitation of all things American, as illustrated in the famous 1957 Renato Carosone song “Tu vuo’ fa l’americano” (You Pretend to Be an American). While making fun of the Americanness that many Italians aspired to in the fifties and sixties, the song was clearly influenced more by rock ‘n’ roll than by traditional Italian music. As a hybrid text that mixes American music with Italian
lyrics, it pays tribute to U.S. popular culture and simultaneously derides it, also expressing ambivalence toward Italians seduced by American culture.

Other examples of hybridity reflect deep social change, such as U.S. anthropologist Marshall Sahlins’s study of the Hawaiian encounter with Europeans (1981, 1985). Central to Sahlins’s study of the cultural impact of Captain Cook’s visits to the Hawaiian Islands in 1778–1779 is the concept of mythopraxis, which refers to the ways in which ancient myths are reenacted in the present. Among the insights of Sahlins’s historical anthropology, of particular interest to this book is the explanation he offers for the perplexing tendency of the Hawaiian aristocracy to mimic English royalty’s sartorial style and even to adopt the names of English kings. According to Sahlins, these hybridizing practices—he did not call them that—reflect a fundamental sociocultural change caused by the encounter. True to his culturalist principles, Sahlins attributes this change not to any immediate material factors but to the breaking of the Hawaiian taboo system, which prohibited men and women from eating together. When Cook’s sailors disembarked, they feasted with Hawaiian women, who did not repel the Englishmen because Hawaiians supposedly believed Cook to be the god Lono. Sahlins argues that the relationships between Hawaiian women and Hawaiian men, Hawaiian commoners and Hawaiian royalty, and Hawaiian royalty and English royalty, are structurally parallel and interlinked. When Hawaiian women shared meals with English sailors, they broke the traditional rules of gender relations, which in turn changed how Hawaiian commoners related to their kings. In order to maintain their superior status among commoners, Hawaiian kings in turn broke the cultural distance between themselves and English royalty by imitating their clothing style and adopting their names.

In Sahlins’s analysis (1981, 1985), alteration in one relationship in the Hawaiian sociocultural structure led to sweeping systemic change. Unlike the culture of covering in post–World War 2 Italy, the hybridity inherent in the practices of the Hawaiian ruling class is symptomatic of deeply rooted cultural changes. Formally acknowledging the impact of their encounters with the English, Hawaiian kings abolished the entire taboo system in 1819 (Kuper, 2000). If we bracket for a moment the political implications of Sahlins’s analysis—made public in the heated controversy which opposed him to the Princeton-based Sri Lankan anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, who argued that Sahlins’s analysis was rooted more in a white man’s colonial fantasy than in empirical evidence (1992)—we are faced with a historical case study where symbolic
factors played an important role in social change, albeit triggered by the all-too-material arrival of well-armed English sailors hungry for food, sex, and conquest.

For reasons of the scope, diversity, and complexity of the factors involved, Latin America rather than Hawaii has been a cardinal site for the study of cultural hybridity. The historical development of the discourse of mestizaje, discussed earlier in this chapter, has culminated in contemporary writings on hybridity, conceived in broader terms than mestizaje’s mostly racial and ethnic connotations to include the fine arts, comics, graffiti, museums, and cultural consumption writ large (notably, García-Canclini, 1989/1995, and Martín-Barbero, 1993a, the latter discussed in Chapter One). In the influential Culturas Híbridas (García-Canclini, 1989; English translation, García-Canclini, 1995); Néstor García-Canclini offers one of the most systematic treatments of hybridity, grounded in Latin American arts, cultures, and politics. In García-Canclini’s view, theories of dependency and magical realism fail to understand the complex Latin American reality, where authoritarianism mixes with liberalism and democracy with paternalism. The central inadequacy of these theories is their conception of the relation between culture and socioeconomic development, the thesis that the disagreements between cultural modernism and social modernization make a defective version of the modernity canonized by the metropolis. Or the inverse: that for being the land of pastiche and bricolage, where many periods and aesthetics are cited, we have had the pride of being postmodern for centuries, and in a unique way. Neither the “paradigm” of imitation, nor that of originality, nor the “theory” that attributes everything to dependency, nor the one that lazily wants to explain us by the “marvelously real” or a Latin American surrealism, are able to account for our hybrid cultures. (p. 6)

For García-Canclini, then, the notion of hybridity is helpful precisely because it is an analytical tool for understanding a mixed reality created by dynamic links, on the one hand, between different historical periods and, on the other hand, between present-day politics, culture, and economics. The former produce “multitemporal heterogeneity” (see pp. 9, 47), caused by the fact that in Latin America only rarely has modernization replaced tradition, and the latter creates what the author calls “impure genres” (p. 249).

The idea of multitemporal heterogeneity, or tiempos mixtos, reflects at once the continuing relevance of the indigenous, colonial, and post-colonial cultural sediments in Latin American societies, and the fact that
“Latin America [is] a . . . complex articulation of traditions and modernities (diverse and unequal), a heterogenous continent consisting of countries in each of which coexist multiple logics of development” (García-Canclini, 1989/1995, p. 9). In the author’s view, the aforementioned contradictions between modernism and modernization explain why, for example, the Brazilian Constitution of 1824 integrated the Declaration of the Rights of Man while slavery was still a reality in Brazilian society, or, more recently, why middle-class households in cities from Santiago to Mexico City contain books in several languages, colonial furniture, indigenous crafts, personal finance magazines, and satellite television. This makes the middle classes feel that they are cultured, since “[b]eing cultured—including being cultured in the modern era—implies not so much associating oneself with a repertory of exclusively modern objects and messages, but rather knowing how to incorporate the art and literature of the vanguard, as well as technological advances, into traditional matrices of social privilege and symbolic distinction (pp. 46–47).

This mixed reality that in the bourgeoisie finds its expression in a mundane, everyday life eclecticism shows how little, García-Canclini points out, the binary opposition between “tradition” and “modernity” contributes to our understanding of social dynamics.

Graffiti and comics are examples of cultural impurity. These “constitutionally hybrid genres” (García-Canclini, 1989/1995, p. 249) result from contradictions within and between the economic, political, and cultural realms. As a mode of expression of those who do not have access to public means of communication, such as youth, the urban poor, or political dissidents, graffiti is a hybrid in both style and intent (readers interested in comics may look at pp. 254–257). Graffiti “affirms territory but destructures the collections of material and symbolic goods” (p. 249) by claiming a public wall as property but imbuing it with content that escapes and in some cases even counters prevalent meanings and ideologies. For example, during a 1986 papal visit to Colombia, the walls of Bogotá intoned, “God does not do his job. Not even on Sunday,” and “Don’t believe anymore: Go for a walk,” clear expressions of disillusionment with the country’s intractable problems. Three years later in hyperinflation-wracked Argentina, graffiti alternately expressed indignation: “Put your representative to work: don’t reelect him”; or hopelessness: “Yankees go home, and take us with you” (p. 251), the latter example illustrating an ironic twist on dependency theory. Stylistically, graffiti fuse typography, color, and words in fragmented messages, and when several graffiti artists use the same space, the superimposition
of several styles is compared by García-Canclini to the “incongruent rhythm of the video” (p. 249). Hence the author’s characterization of graffiti as “a syncretic and transcultural medium” (p. 251). (In Chapter Five, stylistic fusions and discontinuities form a major component of my analysis of Tele Chobis, the Mexican copycat version of Teletubbies.)

In Latin America, then, hybridity is shaped at once by ancient intercultural encounters and contemporary social dynamics. In García-Canclini’s view (1989/1995), hybridity helps us understand the uncertainty that surrounds modernity in Latin America, since hybridity highlights the mixtures and discontinuities that have characterized at once the encounter between the modern and the traditional in history, and the interactions between the global, regional, national, and local that continue to this day. Hence García-Canclini’s guarded engagement with postmodernism, which he conceives as a lens through which to revisit the exclusionary and reappropriative ways in which modernity has related to traditions. Whether in the form of state institutions and official discourse, or since the 1980s in the form of corporate practices and media-propagated consumerist ideology, Latin American modernity and modernism have integrated traditions rather than caused their demise.

The discontinuous, selective, and unequal processes through which this integration has been accomplished, and its outcome, can be grasped only through a “transdisciplinary” approach, which García-Canclini (1989/1995) expresses first in a transportation and communication metaphor: “The anthropologist arrives in the city by foot, the sociologist by car and via the main highway, the communications specialist by plane” (p. 4). His second metaphor is architectural, since understanding processes of hybridization requires mixed methodologies that hitherto have addressed separate realms of knowledge, which he compares with a building’s floors. In contrast, today we need “nomad sciences capable of circulating through the staircases that connect these floors” (p. 2). An interdisciplinary approach with an empirical and not merely textual focus, the author concludes, establishes crucial connections between the cultural and political realms.

A notion of hybridity grounded in a concrete socio-politico-economic context is central to the interdisciplinary approach García-Canclini (1989/1995) advocates. Compared to the more celebratory conceptions of hybridity discussed earlier, García-Canclini warns against uncritical celebrations of cultural pluralism and mixture, and he is circumspect about cultural hybridity’s potential in terms of political empowerment.
His conception of hybridity is political, in the sense that he fully accounts for the fact that hybridity’s constitutive processes entail both inclusion and exclusion of traditional forms into modern practices, and reflect both hybridization and separation between various social strata and their cultural expressions. The hybrid is also political, because it helps elite groups integrate memory and the cultural artifacts reminiscent of the past into a hegemonic national framework, an issue discussed at length in my earlier analysis of the discourse of mestizaje. It is to underscore this point that García-Canclini writes of “the cultural need to confer a denser meaning on the present and the political need to legitimize the current hegemony by means of the prestige of the historical patrimony” (p. 28, emphasis in original).

The notion of hybridity as used by García-Canclini (1989/1995) captures what he calls oblique power (p. 258), by which he means the subtle and refracted ways in which power operates in historically mixed, culturally hybrid, and politically transitioning societies like Latin America’s. We cannot understand power in terms of “confrontations and vertical actions” (p. 259), because power’s effectiveness stems from the interweaving of relations of power between one social class and another, one ethnic group and another, one generation and another, and the interactions among these pairs. In this view it is important to fully account for the structures through which the convoluted power vectors mentioned earlier operate. In other words, he calls for a critical, and not merely interpretive, exploration of hybridity as a social condition: “One may forget about totality when one is interested only in the differences among people, not when one is also concerned with inequality” (p. 11).

García-Canclini’s vision of hybridity is more difficult to criticize as textualist or populist, because it integrates the political-economic context of hybridity. Nonetheless, as we shall see in the following section, opponents of hybridity do not have the patience for such intricate differences and have usually attacked the idea of hybridity at large.

**THE “ANTIHYBRIDITY BACKLASH”**

The widespread use of the concept of hybridity has attracted critiques whose tones have ranged from cautionary to scathing. Strong divergences on its meaning and implications mire hybridity in two paradoxes. First, hybridity is believed to be both subversive and pervasive, exceptional and ordinary, marginal yet mainstream. Second, foggy conceptual boundaries and extreme semantic openness invite arbitrary and at times
exclusionary usage. “Hybridity,” as Mexican American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1996) put it, “can be appropriated by anyone to mean practically anything” (pp. 12–13). These contradictions have enabled critics to depict hybridity theory as poststructuralist license, and to impute to its proponents reactionary politics wrapped in trendy jargon. This hostility against hybridity is founded on (1) allegations of theoretical uselessness; (2) suspicion toward the high priests of hybridity—expatriate, Western-based intellectuals; and (3) perhaps most importantly, the charge that hybridity rhetoric embraces the logic of transnational capitalism and is therefore “neocolonial.” As the next pages show, the “anti-hybridity backlash” (Nederveen-Pieterse, 2001, p. 221) sees hybridity at best as academic nonsense, at worst as a pernicious affirmation of hegemonic power.

Since all cultures are always hybrid, the assumption of erstwhile purity is untenable, and as a result hybridity is conceptually dispensable (Nederveen-Pieterse, 2001). This point’s apparent simplicity underscores a deeper problem. The notion of hybridity invokes the fusion of two (or more) components into a third term irreducible to the sum of its parts. By unhinging the identities of its ingredients without congealing into a stable third term, hybridity enters a vicious circle where its condition of existence is at the same time its kiss of death. Another cause of alleged theoretical futility is hybridity’s appropriation in areas that range from theology to biology. When a concept means so many different things to so many different people in so many different fields and so many different contexts, it ceases to have any meaning whatsoever. Hybridity’s extreme polysemy has in effect morphed it into a floating signifier, a situation that undermines the explanatory power and parsimony that concepts usually have. And yet, in spite of this seemingly intractable paradox, hybridity remains an appealing concept, as the burgeoning written record unmistakably demonstrates.

Hybridity is also decried as a self-gratifying discourse by emigré intellectuals who indulge in fancy theorizing, seen as a form of “moral self-congratulation” (Werbner, 1997, p. 22) that is politically vacuous (Friedman, 1997; Hutnyk, 1997). In a hard-hitting essay in Race and Class, Aijaz Ahmad (1995) writes that “between postcoloniality as it exists in a former colony like India, and postcoloniality as the condition of discourse practiced by such critics as Homi Bhabha, there would appear to be a considerable gap” (p. 10). This is Ahmad at his most euphemistic toward Bhabha, who embodies what Ahmad derogatorily calls “the migrant intellectual” (p. 13) who (falsely) enunciates hybridity as a
universal experience. From their privileged Western location, intellectuals like Bhabha, Ahmad intones, have abdicated their critical role and been co-opted by their success in Western academe. In Bhabha’s work, this positionality manifests itself in his associating hybridity with contingency, contingency with agency, and in turn agency with counter-hegemonic resistance. Ahmad is right to point out that postcolonial intellectual discourses of hybridity and mimicry sharply contrast with the living conditions of millions of people whose energies are devoted to securing the barest conditions of survival, but his charge of reactionary intellectual politics stops short of engaging the complexity of the issue, an intricacy which is explored in the Francophone argument between Créolité and nègritude. The next section uses this dispute to explore the links between hybridity and hegemony and to conclude this chapter.

**Hybridity and Hegemony: Métissage, Créolité, and Nègritude**

In *Writing Diaspora* (1993), Hong Kong–born cultural critic Rey Chow contends that “[w]hat Bhabha’s word ‘hybridity’ [revives], in the masquerade of deconstructing anti-imperialism, and ‘difficult’ theory, is an old functionalist notion of what a dominant culture permits in the interest of maintaining its own equilibrium” (p. 35). The claim that hybridity is hegemonically constructed in the interest of dominant societal sectors resonates with my ulterior analysis of the Latin American ideology of mestizaje. By displacing mixture from race to culture and selectively appropriating native traditions, Latin American ideologists of mestizaje integrated precolonial cultures in the dominant society. This process allowed nonthreatening arts, crafts, and rituals, but imposed the Spanish language, the Catholic faith, and colonial political and social organization. As a discourse that recognizes, even celebrates, cultural difference, mestizaje in effect is a tool for “bleaching” all but the most benign practices that gave pre-Hispanic natives their identities. In the name of cultural mixture within the emerging nation-states, the pre-Hispanic life world was reordered by the descendants of the Conquistadores according to a residual colonial logic.

The dispute between proponents of Créolité and nègritude illustrates the tension between hybridity’s progressive and hegemonic aspects. In *Mythologie du métissage* [Mythology of Hybridity] (1998)—whose title reveals a skeptical outlook—Roger Toumson, a professor of comparative French and Francophone literatures at the University of the Antilles,
describes hybridity as a “lyrical illusion” (p. 11). Contending that hybridity is a discourse of power, Toumson sets out to understand how and why hybridity emerged as a discourse that is well adapted to the complexities of the contemporary world. While Toumson agrees with the premise that all cultures are hybrid, he sees the deployment of such a rhetoric as a cosmopolitanism that is at best apolitical, at worst hypocritical. He therefore dismisses the premise expressed in the title of René Duboux’s book, *Métissage ou barbarie* (1994), that the two alternatives for the world are hybridity or barbarism—a premise Toumson dismisses as “an antiphilosophy of identity” (p. 64). In Toumson’s view, asserting that “we are all hybrids” is at the heart of a new planetary ideology whose basic aim is to avoid addressing highly political issues such as racial and colonial oppression. What if, asks Toumson, we would insist that, for instance, Italian culture and language are hybrid? This would reverse the hybridity discourse in the sense that while denotatively we can repeat that all cultures are hybrid, we have in fact used hybridity as a framework for studying and defining postcolonial nations and cultures. In other words, hybridity is a discourse with a particular geopolitical directionality, and as a result should be treated with suspicion.

In pursuing his argument, Toumson contrasts two discourses of cultural identity born in what was the French colonial empire: Créolité and négritude. Against Créolité’s celebrations of hybridity as the distinguishing feature of international relations, a perspective embodied in Édouard Glissant’s *Le discours Antillais* (1981) and his later work (Glissant, 1993), and more recently in the volume *Éloge de la créolité* (In Praise of Créolité) (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, 1989), Toumson (1998) argues that hybridity is a discourse of “voluntary amnesia” (p. 28) that covers past and lingering racial inequities. Glissant (1993), the Martinique-born high priest of the Créolité movement in Caribbean French postcolonies, sees the mutual interpenetration of cultures as the engine of history, and the discourse of hybridity as a guarantee against intolerance. Toumson faults Glissant for glossing over the inequality that characterizes intercultural dynamics in a world defined by a hierarchical system of international relations. More important, Toumson argues that Glissant’s view of history ignores the heterogenous and antagonist forces unleashed by the “homogenizing and dissolving power of the monocentric technoculture” (p. 58).

Born in Africa in the 1950s, the négritude movement is grounded in three major ideologies: one cultural, focusing on black uniqueness; the second socioeconomic, in sync with African socialism of the time;
and the third political, with the twin objectives of national independence and pan-African unity (Toumson, 1998). Négritude’s chief exponents disagree on the basis of black specificity while acknowledging its presence. For the Senegalese poet and ideologue Léopold Sédar Senghor, blacks are essentially close to nature and gifted with superior emotional abilities. Aimé Césaire, a native of the French Caribbean island of Martinique and négritude’s other leading figure, spurned Senghor’s biological determinism, preferring a cultural constructivist understanding of black identity. Both leaders, however, agreed on an anti-acculturationist agenda, arguing in favor of an intercultural dialogue between Africa and the West, as long as both would be able to preserve their distinct identities. In contrast to Créolité’s celebration of a chaotic, heterogenous world culture where multiple histories coexist in a state of continuous mutual hybridization, the négritude movement rejected the hybridity thesis. In a famous talk at the first Congress of Black Writers, held in Paris in 1956, Césaire argued that “it is because a culture is not a simple juxtaposition of cultural traits that there could not be a hybrid culture.” He then clarified: “I do not mean that people who are biologically hybrid would be incapable of founding a civilization. I do mean that the civilization that they would find would not be a civilization unless it is not hybrid” (quoted in Toumson, 1998, pp. 64–65, my translation). Interestingly, civilization here is invoked not in the French Enlightenment meaning of civilisation, a cosmopolitan, universalist, and material culture. Rather, Césaire’s use of civilization is redolent of the German counter-enlightenment notion of Kultur, which encapsulates the unique and genial characteristics of the nation and focuses on inward, spiritual, and as such “pure” dimensions of national life. In Césaire’s logic, a civilization cannot be hybrid, because mixture undermines national and cultural uniqueness.

Currently salient discourses of hybridity, with which Créolité is aligned, undermine more political discourses such as négritude by positioning themselves as discourses of openness and tolerance, casting the opposite perspective as provincial in its attachment to cultural distinctiveness. While négritude appeared in the second stage of the narrative of cultural encounters—colonialism presumably being the first—it is best understood from a dialectical, not chronological, perspective (Toumson, 1998). From Toumson’s standpoint, négritude is the third moment of a dialectical process. Inversely, while sequentially Créolité came third, it should be relocated to the second stage of the historical dialectic of intercultural relations. In Toumson’s view, the historical
placement of the apolitical Créolité after the militant nègritude masks the real opposition between them, and his adoption of a dialectical approach brings that tension to light.

Toumson’s criticism of hybridity as an ambivalent and mythical discourse of power reflects a deep engagement with cultural mixture and therefore is qualitatively different from other critiques (Ahmad, 1995; Friedman, 1997). In highlighting nègritude’s and Créolité’s commonality as two discourses of the dominated, Toumson underscores that nègritude, claiming a radical cultural relativism, and Créolité, embracing a universalism predicated on cultural mixing, represent two sides of the hybridity discourse. Both nègritude’s glorification of the specific and Créolité’s celebration of the diverse betray a preoccupation with ideologically defining a mixed, diverse world culture created out of a hodgepodge of particularistic ingredients. Toumson (1998) thus reaches the conclusion that “the ideology of hybridity is in effect ambivalent. Two problems are posed at the same time: that of the philosophical legitimating of cultural relativism, and that of the sociological rehabilitation of dominated cultures (p. 77, my translation). Nonetheless, Toumson sensibly recognizes that the value of hybridity as a discourse lies in its invalidation of the idea of total difference between cultures.

Criticism of hybridity reflects conceptual ambiguity, ideological differences, and various levels of tolerance of a ubiquitous and often misused trope. With the notable exception of Toumson (1998), whose thoughtful and provocative book explores the myriad dimensions of hybridity, the antihybridity backlash’s emphasis on hybridity’s problematic status rests on a priori dismissal at the expense of serious engagement. If hybridity is pervasive, as most scholars seem to agree, then we do need to call it as it is and develop conceptual tools to tackle its vexing ambiguity. Toumson (1998), and to a lesser extent, the late Said (1994) of Culture and Imperialism, demonstrate the value and possibility of a critical engagement with hybridity. In contrast, it is precisely by using the concept without rigorous theoretical grounding that we unleash hybridity’s polysemic excesses and ripen it for various kinds of appropriation. Perhaps the most important foundation we can provide to uses of hybridity is the political and economic contexts that shape the variety of hybridities manifest in different cultural practices, heeding Said’s call that “cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality” (1994, p. 14).
The confusion and contention that surround hybridity make the reconnection Said advocates a daunting challenge. In the following chapters I explore various applications of hybridity, in order to illustrate how this trope works in actuality, and the role that communication processes play in the formation of hybridity. Chapter Four examines the utilization of the notion of hybridity in contemporary public discourse, and establishes a continuity with previous notions of cultural mixture as discourses of integration. Chapter Five explores hybridity’s usefulness in studying the practices of the global television industry and in analyzing television texts that mix various cultural components. Chapter Six empirically analyzes hybridity as a local existential experience. The concluding Chapter Seven finally formulates the notion of critical transculturalism as a framework that enables analyses of the communication aspects of cultural mixture in their political and economic contexts.