

## Hybridity Saves?

Authenticity and/or the Critique of Appropriation

John Hutnyk

Who the fuck wants purity? [asks Paul Gilroy] the idea of hybridity, of intermixture, presupposes two anterior purities. . . I think there isn't any purity; there isn't any anterior purity. . . that's why I try not to use the word hybrid. . . Cultural production is not like mixing cocktails.<sup>1</sup>

Hybridity is by now such a contested word that its referent has dissolved into mush. The criticisms of hybridity can be collected into several categories: the heritage of hybridity's botanical roots,<sup>2</sup> the sterility of the hybrid mule, and its extension to Mulatto, mixed race, half-breed and other obscene racisms; the reclamation of the term reconfigured as creativity at the margins and as advent of vibrant intersections that cannot be otherwise incorporated; the hegemony of the pure that co-constitutes the hybrid; the inconsequence of hybridity in the recognition that everyone is hybrid, everyone is "different"; the commercial co-option of multiplicities; and that if everyone is hybrid, then the old problems of race, class, gender, sex, money and power still apply. All of this is the terrain of hybridity-talk made fashionable in the salons of culture commentary.

Culture is oftentimes valorised as a site of struggle, where, in the accounting processes of the public domain, the mere fact of appearance counts as a politics. Visibility does matter in a context where exclusion from resources and opportunities is much more than an absent-minded and myopic blindness of the dominant cultural groups, to be repaired by policy. But visibility here is only part one of a struggle, as State-sponsored celebration of

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increased visibilities for hitherto marginal groups can readily be turned to market opportunism. There are many ways in which the cultural industries select privileged brokers as the commissars of multiplicity and the shop-floor traders of difference. At the same time, criticism of both opportunism and co-option as the dual traps of authenticity has a flip-side in the appropriation observable as favored marginals become the resource material of iconic style kings and queens, strutting wares of dubious patrimony.

In a provocative book, *Ethics After Idealism*, Rey Chow suggests that the popularized concepts hybridity, diversity and pluralism may be grouped with others such as heteroglossia, dialogism, heterogeneity and multiplicity, as well as with notions of the postcolonial and cosmopolitan, as serving to “obliterate” “the legacy of colonialism understood from the viewpoint of the colonized” and to “ignore the experiences of poverty, dependency, subalterneity that persist well beyond the achievement of national independence.”<sup>3</sup> This is quite a claim. That some can imagine that the whole world is postcolonial today is a kind of thinking which offers a smooth either/or as if it were “a matter of choice between being a colonizer and being colonized.” Chow continues: “The enormous seductiveness of the postmodern hybridite’s discourse lies. . . in its invitation to join the power of global capitalism by flattening out past injustices” in a way that accepts the extant relations of power and where “the recitation of past injustices seems tedious and unnecessary.”<sup>4</sup> Forget colonial violence, white supremacy, systematic exploitation and oppression: hybridity saves.

The suggestion that hybridity-talk smoothes over historical violence is not simply a call for a return to studies of the Third World or the poor and excluded. It matters everywhere. Thus I want to ask how useful the term hybridity is in the advanced North Atlantic zones, especially as it is deployed in discussions of South Asian popular culture and music performance made in these zones—the celebrated cultural industry and its recent “Asian” turn. Here, those who are well connected and globally mobile can plunder the cultural resources of the world without restrictions—this year it is Asian dance music that provides the merchandise for resale in the elite salons. Shorn of political roots, toned down and sweetly packaged as exotic magical mystery tourist fare, the palatable “flavours of transnational capital”<sup>5</sup> do not burn the tender palates of middle-class, bourgeois liberalism. Examples abound: chameleon groover Boy George has been working in Mumbai with Bappi Lahiri on a Hindi film soundtrack *Love Story*

'98<sup>6</sup>; Bally Sagoo was signed by Sony Music in an attempt to cash in on the new fashionability; Talvin Singh's Anoukha night club in London spawned imitations across the planet (New York, Frankfurt, Tokyo); and Asian punksters Cornershop have toured America as support for Oasis. Asians are visible in the cultural marketplace. The "coolie has become cool," in Sanjay Sharma's deeply ironic phrase.<sup>7</sup>

When the "coolie becomes cool," we enter a contradictory moment between the celebration of appropriation and the defensiveness of authenticity. In the realm of appropriation, people rejoice in a phantasmagoric fascination with the East: George Harrison, Gong, Teardrop Explodes, Paul Weller, Kula Shaker, and Madonna. On the other side, within the narrative of cultural authenticity, we have Ravi Shanker, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's Qawwali, Hindi film songs, Bhangra, and the Asian Underground. Certainly, there are overlaps between the competing narratives, and ways in which they partake of the same principles may sometimes seem more evident than others (the duet between Nusrat and Eddie Vedder in the film *Dead Man Walking*, for example, complicates the neat list). Neither of the lists alone is authentic, the second no less than the first, since both, within the structure of the Culture Industry, require that we turn away from the complexity of social, economic and political relationships and elevate cultural practices to an autonomous and self-sufficient realm. To do so is the master trick of the capitalist system—that all exchanges take place on an equal plane. We, however, need to look for ways to rethink a progressive cultural politics.

### **Visibility's Blindspots**

In the serious culture salon discussions, an immediate malaise seems to prevail. Hybridity-talk serves as a cloaking device, not of the strategic construct of cultural authenticity, but of political, social and economic differentials. Perhaps there are just too many celebrants of the East like Madonna, or white pop avatars Kula Shaker, with their transparently naïve but mass media resourced pantomime, as well as too many celebrants of "more authentic" *desi* sounds, such as Bhangra purists or Qawwali devotees. A cultural exchange that assumes a level of equivalence—a terrain of multi-culti creativity—occludes the underlying structural inequalities of the contemporary field. The visibility of Apache Indian, for example, in both the U.S.A. and U.K., is held up as a paradigmatic instance of hybridity as an interventionist politics. Apache's get-

up, however, is more frequently discussed as an iconic hybridity rather than as a politics that requires analysis. What politics in any case? Arranged marriages and anti-drugs social messages, but not so much more.<sup>8</sup> Apache becomes the exemplar of hybridity crossover, but the circumstances, and even the specificities, of his work are not systematically engaged: dining out on the cultural cache gathered from the mix of Jamaican *patois*, Indian *stylee* and Birmingham English.<sup>9</sup>

In a not unrelated way, hybridity-talk drags theorists into authenticity denials and the binary logic of difference, which leaves them unable to posit a politics that does more than acknowledge complexity. For me it is much more interesting and useful to note the political eruptions that may still be discerned amidst the “hybrid creativities” allocated to the post-colonial. I believe these cannot be understood only as hybrid, they imply a critique of the projects of hybridity, identity and simplistic notions of (commercialized) difference. I’d more readily celebrate a group like Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) or Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental’s political identity than their ethnic flavour (even as that offers a context for the political struggle at the present time). However, Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental are considered too militant, and at least to some extent not yet wholly digestible (even as scholarly commentary chews them up, masticates and domesticates the sounds).

Reassertions of Bhangra purism, condemnation of cross-over styles, uneasiness at the co-option and compromises entailed by high profile “mixed” mixers—all this has heightened the authenticity and appropriation debate, and made hybridity newsworthy copy. By the middle of 1996 even the *New York Times* was announcing that Hindi pop had met hip hop “as a New Generation of South Asians finds its groove,”<sup>10</sup> and no, this was not an ad for Pepsi but a feature article written by Somini Sengupta reporting the Asian dance scene at Planet 28—though focused somewhat voyeuristically on the gang rivalries of groups like Punjabi By Nature (PBN) and Madina, a Pakistani crew. Nevertheless, the celebration of an ascendant Asian-America advances by way of new television channels presenting Hindi films and music (for example, ITV, the local cable station), new clubs in Manhattan, Jackson Heights, Queens, and an explosion in the Gujarati Party scene—all featured as examples of that cultural diversity which makes New York proud.<sup>11</sup> Of course, this congratulatory multiculti activity ignores any detailed analysis of the race politics of Asian America and, as Chow suggests, “obliterates” experiences of colonialism, poverty,

dependency, etc., even in the U.S. context, and especially with regard to U.S. imperialism. What for example does Asian-America really mean? Is it relatively privileged “second generationers” clubbing in the cool nightspots of N.Y.C., or even white kids with *bindis* smoking *charas* and down with the *ganj* (hood)?, or is it Madonna doing easternized dance tracks, learning to meditate (MTV Special, May 1998), and dressing up exotic for the cover of *Rolling Stone* (August 1998),<sup>12</sup> or for the Grammy Awards (February 1999)? Fragmenting the notions of where America actually operates, is Asian-America more visible in Coca-Cola versus Pepsi in the Punjab; or in policy initiatives and sanction threats over the Indian or Pakistani bomb; structural adjustment and financial transfer; outsourcing of micro-computing and secretarial work to Bangalore; or the establishment of Microsoft Corporations’ second headquarters in Hyderabad, Andhara Pradesh? The questions to ask here between politics in the world and performance in the clubs would be: Why is it that cultural celebration rarely translates into political transformation? Does sanctioned visibility in the center occlude secret agendas and invisibility for the rest? Can high profile be traded for redress?

Is it not good news that North Atlantic Asian culture has a new degree of recognition? There is obviously more complicated stuff going on here than a new craze for dance parties. What, for example, does the celebration of visibility and creativity mean in this context? At a time when politics has become “identity” and the “right” to be different, how needful is an analysis which questions the terms in which the new debates proceed? At a time when explicit class politics in the West seems blocked, does the shift to identity, hybridity and the post-colonial express a decline in aspirations (to transform the entire system) and an accommodation to things as they seem now and forever to be? Importing culturally hybrid styles via the mass media that sanitises and decontextualizes the political context of those styles might be recognized as a danger.<sup>13</sup> Similarly the dilemma of accepting a performative “place in the sun” as hybrid or exotic novelties in order to claim space and pay rent while day-to-day racism and exploitation prevails is not without its necessities. The contradictions here are clear where the “melting pot” may mean participation at the feast of culture, but not always as a diner—there are cooks, service staff and guests, and perhaps even some who give speeches among those who deserve to be theorized. Yet all of these subject positions may be recruited to the equation of visibility with equality which

serves to perpetuate the economic system that profits from racism, colonialism and the trick of surplus labour extraction.<sup>14</sup> The role of Asians in Britain and the U.S. is convoluted: admitted for economic reasons, distanced from national citizenship (the Tebbit test in England, exclusions in the States), they now participate in the emergence of an alternative cultural space which enacts the dialectic between that which cannot be contained within national imageries and the creeping subsumption or assimilation of aspects of that culture which can be so contained, repackaged by the material girl to then be sold in the millions.<sup>15</sup>

### Limits of Cultural Struggle

What role for talk of “culture” in this domain? In her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe argues that it is “only through culture that we conceive and enact new subjects and practices” which question the modes of Government that suppress dissent and reproduce capitalist relations of production. Lowe suggests that it is “because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history” that, through culture, “alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity and public life are imagined.” It is, however, unclear exactly what is meant by culture here, and Lowe seems to locate oppositional practice—action and theory—outside the realm of material and political struggle. True, she says this is “not to argue that cultural struggle can be the exclusive site for practice,”<sup>16</sup> but it seems that her analysis overdetermines the cultural in ways that are possibly reactionary responses to a rigid economism inherited from the more overtly orthodox reifications of Marxism. If this bogey were not considered so threatening, then the privilege of culture may be less absolute.<sup>17</sup> What, in any case, does cultural politics signify in a market relations context?

What do we make of the process by which once unassimilable aspects of culture—say body piercings, *bindis* or spicy food—have been integrated within mass commercial culture? Is the aestheticization of cultural quirks according to a capitalist rationality (that all differences can be equated at the market) something that can be fought and won at the level of “cultural struggle”? Surely all that is fought for at this level is authenticity—and not material redress and transformation.

It is Lowe’s argument that the new conditions of flexible production demand a new conception of culture and generate a “need for an alternative understanding of cultural production.”<sup>18</sup> But contrary to her assertion that Marxism “cannot account for the current

global restructuring of capitalism,<sup>19</sup> or flexible trans-national accumulation, undermining of citizenship or racialization and feminisation of labour, the notions of real and formal sub-sumption, and the evident extension of capitalist relations to the entire planet, are the co-ordinates of Marxism that today makes the most sense, and makes sense of the place of cultural production within global restructuring.<sup>20</sup>

Lowe, later in her book, is critical of liberals, who remain “wedded to a culturalist paradigm, however multiculturalist, that still tends to isolate culture from material relations.” Here her critique is of the function of university education which “serves to socialize and incorporate students from other backgrounds into the capitalist market economy.”<sup>21</sup> This is exactly where I think the celebration of cultural struggle as a potential site of disruption begins to falter, since co-option into the assimilation project of the multiculture of capital is all too readily always on offer—with attendant material benefits for a few, the forlorn promise of their always postponed delivery for the rest (only some elite staff of color in the institutions, only some gangstas making it out of the ghetto alive). That Lowe points to the efficacy of interdisciplinary studies as a potential disruption of the narratives of traditional disciplines that have historically subordinated the concerns of non-Western, racial and ethnic minority peoples,<sup>22</sup> does not yet make for the basis of a transformation of that system, nor defend against the co-option and assimilation that facilitates generational change within the institutional structure. Critique of disciplinarity, even where it refuses to set up a counter disciplinarity, does not yet distinguish this move from, say in anthropology, the reflexive critique of the 1970s and 1980s that enabled a (partial) generational transfer (at a time of shrinking job opportunities), nor from the countercultural movements that elevated baby-boomers to the establishment, or further back, the ways movements in art like Cubism or Surrealism inaugurated generational change in the galleries. What remains absent here is the politics of an organization capable of actual disruption not only of the university or of individual institutions, but also of the market system in entirety. Lowe does note this danger, writing that:

institutionalizing such fields as Ethnic Studies still contains an inevitable paradox: institutionalization provides a material base within the university for a transformatory critique of traditional disciplines and their traditional separations, and yet the institutionalization of any field or curriculum that establishes ortho-

dox objects and methods submits in part to the demands of the university and its educative function of socializing subjects into the state.<sup>23</sup>

Lowe however would risk institutionalization and appropriation into the system because of the possibility that the interdisciplinary institution may remain “a site from which to educate students to be actively critical” of the traditional function of the university. I have a lot of sympathy for this position, yet think that more is possible.

### **Authenticity Trap**

In order to challenge Madonna’s efforts to include “authentic” Asian styles in her music, or to condemn Kula Shaker’s trinketizing versions of temple harmony and Hindu spiritualism, there is no need to posit a fixed and authenticated Asian “Culture” as the bench mark for critique. Madonna and Kula Shaker patently get it wrong as they play into the hands of Hindu fundamentalism and essentializing fantasy. But what is offensive is that they have the industry backing to circulate their fictions world-wide in ways that have consequences in other spheres—for example, in perpetuating notions of India as the land of timeless spirituality, not as a location of modernity, nuclear tests, IMF restructuring, elite exploitation and social struggles, etc. To question this does not require a fundamentalist notion of true or traditional roots (contra Chambers<sup>24</sup>), nor even a strictly agreed “imagined community.”

Chambers suggests that the “notion of the pure, uncontaminated ‘other,’ as individual and as culture, has been crucial to anti-capitalist critique and condemnation of the cultural economy of the West in the modern world,” and that the “privileged occidental observer” defined authenticity in terms that suited occidental desire (desire for what should “constitute the native’s genuine culture and authenticity”) and prevented the “other” from speaking.<sup>25</sup> But anti-capitalist critique was perhaps not in every case beset with this limit that reinforced the logic of definitions, even as verbose Western critics did so often accept “the Other [as] authentic without a problem” while “only the dominant self [could] be problematic.”<sup>26</sup> This is indeed “very frightening,” as Gayatri Spivak suggests. But what a number of anti-capitalist critiques of inauthenticity and appropriation pointed to was not simply that there shouldn’t be appropriation—and so authenticity should remain the preserve of timeless authentics—but that the logic of this system required organized resistance leading to its overthrow. If the



"Other" were "allowed"—Chambers's word—to speak within capitalism there would still need to be other Others. Talk of tradition displaced by "traffic" in the "sights, sounds and languages of hybridity"<sup>27</sup> might rather be the latest resource of a cannibalizing capitalism that now sells us difference, inauthenticity, irony and reflexive (self-indulgent) critique as its most privileged market strategy.

Chambers wants to remember that there are "real differences" as well as "brutal defeats and dead ends." But in this "Broken World" he also wonders if it is not possible to:

"glimpse in recent musical contaminations, hybrid languages and cultural mixtures and opening on to other worlds, experiences, histories, in which not only does the Empire write back to the centre," as Salman Rushdie puts it, but also "sounds off" against it? Is there not here, apart from the obvious economic power of the Western world to distribute and market these sounds, that novel, these words, those stories, a poetic twisting and turning of language against itself that constantly undercuts hegemonic pretensions on reality[?]<sup>28</sup>

The obvious power of marketing and distribution is the key. So obvious, it seems, that there shall be no need to account for it, no mode in which something more than accommodation is considered; it is the fixed backdrop—there is no alternative. Or is there? Perhaps Chambers does catch a glimpse here—his hybrid gaze—as he seeks out another location:

The result is a hybrid art that confounds and confuses earlier categorizations through a vernacular mixing of languages that were previously separated. . . . In this deconstruction of both language and its technologies, in these gaps, in the holes in prose, the breaks in sound, there emerge further means and meanings: those differences that permit the process of deferring, and the dispersal and redistribution of powers, of authority, of centre and periphery. . . .an opening to another place.<sup>29</sup>

Cultural activity in the domain of world musics has parallels with the imaginative cultural struggle celebrated by Lowe, and elsewhere championed, in different ways, by both Kobena Mercer and Homi Bhabha. In the end we can applaud, and certainly enjoy the new means and meanings, but there remains much work to be done before the holes in prose and breaks in sound—in which the screams of the millions stomped into the dirt by rampant hybridizing capital—may be not only heard, but redressed, liberated, freed.

Chambers ends his "Broken World" chapter with a scene from Gurinder Chadha's film *I'm British But...* (1988) in which a Bhangra band perform upon a rooftop in Southhall, mimicking and displacing (Chambers' words) the Beatles on the roof of the Apple studios nearly twenty years before. That this scene offers a "very different sense of history, of identity, of centre"<sup>30</sup> may indeed be an example of a "dialogue of difference" in which "our sense of each other is displaced" and "both of us emerge modified,"<sup>31</sup> but what would be required for the "our" and "each other" binarisms of Chambers' subject positions to be displaced yet further? What changes to the global socioeconomic coordinates of the music industry would be necessary so that the white musicians who were singing "Get Back" [to that land where you once belonged] in 1969 were not simply the ones who had the power and resources to make a hit, Norwegian Wood, with an "eastern" sitar melody, while today, some twenty years of "dialogue" on, a South Asians version of that same track, in Punjabi by Cornershop, is bumped off the charts by the likes of Madonna because of her superior marketing organization?

More thoughtful folks than those who expect to find their "world" musicians to be untainted, premodern "natives," writes Timothy Taylor, also cannot "escape the old binaries and expectations" when "authenticity is jettisoned and hybridity is celebrated." Taylor notes that it is always the "natives" who make hybrid music, while "Musicians at the metropolises rarely make musics that are heard as hybrids (even if they are every bit as hybridized as musics from the peripheries)." White mainstream artists instead are placed in more prestigious categories and praised, as was Paul Simon for *Graceland*: Simon reinvented himself artistically and engineered a "creative rebirth."<sup>32</sup> The point that the "native" or marginal person, or culture, is more often hybrid than the center or dominant one repeats an old pattern.

Hybridization and its meanings, as Taylor puts it, "don't work equally well in all the places the diaspora has reached." His example is drawn from Apache Indian who admits that "he injects his music with political concerns and signs of his ethnicity based on his reception on MTV in England." On the other hand, "his popularity among Indians outside the U.K. is quite contested."<sup>33</sup> Up to 1996, it was still possible for surveyors of the internationalization of Hip-Hop to refer to Apache Indian as the only example of a South Asian genre related to rap. Important details such as Apache Indian hails from Birmingham in the U.K. is often over-



looked. And it gets worse. In his acknowledgements for the book, *Droppin' Science*, William Eric Perkins thanks Anu Rao for introducing him "to the 'bhangra' music of South India."<sup>34</sup> Clearly someone such as Rao should have known that bhangra is, in India, a Northern form, from the Punjab, and in Apache's version, it's something that comes out of England considerably transformed from the harvest music of that region. Internationalism here sticks to rather strict and misleading national demarcations.

Nevertheless, Perkins' narrative is insightful, especially where he discusses the influence that "one segment of African American culture plays in the global interdependence shaping the post-industrial. . . world."<sup>35</sup> But if this influence is considered in the context of the extension of U.S. derived cultural forms across the planet, then the "affirmative" spatial politics claimed, through the politics of rap, begins to look rather complicated. Rap claims space at the expense of other cultural forms struggling in the face of cultural imperialisms, transnational jeans, and sportshoe or tracksuit manufacturers. It is certainly not the progressive side of hybridity that has everyone doing flips and twists to get into a pair of American blue jeans, and bouncy Nike trainers.

Is South Asian dance a vehicle of global homogenization? Taylor's discussion of Apache Indian focuses in exhaustive detail on the track "Arranged Marriage." For him it is a "fascinating. . . remarkable,"<sup>36</sup> "ultimately ambivalent,"<sup>37</sup> "interesting" piece, which,

however, South Asian listeners find “too clever,” or offering little, and which “juggles and juxtaposes identity conceptions, with India sometimes far, sometimes near.”<sup>38</sup> The identification of the UK as a “former colonial power with many of its colonised now living in the U.K.”<sup>39</sup> does raise important points about how Apache’s identity “self-fashioning” proceeds. Recognition of the importance of MTV as a vehicle for his experiments is well and good, but it is not clear how much stress should be placed on the former status of Britain as a colonial power. Perhaps a reconsideration is required when we consider the subsumption of world music to the market, and the role of identity self-fashioning as a mode of accommodating differences to that market (and the way that modes of consuming difference are rehearsed, displayed and reinforced by artists such as Apache Indian). That the exotic product (fascinating, remarkable, ambivalent, interesting, clever, and many other terms such as hybrid, pastiche and chaotic seem ready to fit here. . .) of an artist like Apache works to translate culture for the marketplace is not an insignificant function.

This role can take several forms, sometimes self-declared subversive ones, but as with so many other pop-politics performances, so long as in the end the product gets to market, subsumption prevails. Apache Indian has participated in various anti-racist campaigns, such as when he recorded a track, “Movin On,” critical of the ultra-rightist British National Party (BNP) in Tower Hamlets,<sup>40</sup> and he has produced tracks, indeed, such as “Arranged Marriage,” which comment on matters of relevance to his community. However, it’s not clear what Taylor is trying to do when, writing in the context of the anti-racist track rather than the one about marriages, he says: “Whereas an Indian might not be able to find the distance necessary to critique his or her own culture, a geographical outsider with an insider’s interest might get the job done.” The here and there demarcations in this case are simplistic and locate Apache Indian as a kind of displaced person—Apache as “outsider” to his “ancestral” land, in the “seat of the erstwhile Empire,”<sup>41</sup> which is in danger of buying into the very White British xenophobia which fuels the BNP rhetoric in the first place. It is difficult to understand why this characterisation is then followed by a quotation from Apache, which Taylor offers to complete the paragraph, making a totally different point about underestimating Asians as artists and attempts to “put India on the map” of pop stardom.

Taylor quotes with approval, agreeing “thoroughly” with Dick Hebdige’s comment on “second-generation British Asians” [note

the hyphen in Hebdige is not between British and Asian, but between second and generation], where Bhangra and “Indipop” is a “vibrant trademark”:

played across the gaps and tensions not just between “home” and “host culture,” with their different language, behaviour norms, belief systems, and cuisines, not just between *two* cultures (the “traditional” East, the “permissive” or “progressive” West), but between many *different* south Asian cultures, between the multiple boundaries which for centuries have marked off different religions, castes, ethnic traditions with a “community” which appears homogeneous only when viewed from the outside.<sup>42</sup>

The trouble with Hebdige’s now standard point against the homogenizing of “objects” like the East or the West, is that here the East as a place of difference feeds, equally as well as the old homogenized and essentialized entity, into the carnivorous machine of capital. Not only is the culture of the “second-generation” already stamped with a trademark (in a way that inevitably anticipates Cool Britannia rhetorics), but the East as site of difference is reified again in the anthropological mode where strange tongues, other beliefs, centuries old (read unchanging) religions, (intractable) caste divisions, and the staple trope of spicy food mark out the other community. The pattern of reportage which runs—look at these different people, look closely, and I, as expert witness, will show they are even more different than it seems—does not undermine exoticization. Rather, this reflex action gives an alibi for business as usual marketing and consumption of difference.

Does visibility confer benefits on the appropriated culture? When we consider the way that tea, coffee, tobacco, the potato, chocolate, and so on have been absorbed into British culture, there has been little corresponding benefit to those whose culture first provided the “content” (indeed, in so many cases with disastrous consequences, plantation work, slavery, bonded labour and death). Who should be surprised that the market for various world musics would suggest a different pattern of subsumption?

### **Cultural Politics**

Exclusive identity affiliation and separatism poses an obstacle for alliance and solidarity, but it is possible to imagine affiliations across identifications.<sup>43</sup> In an interview with Lowe, Angela Davis offered the formula of “basing identity on politics rather than the politics on identity.”<sup>44</sup> Since groupings like Asian, South Asian, and even Indian or Pakistani, as well as British Asian, Asian-American,

etc., can only be usefully thought of as socially constructed entities and never in the natural or static ways that are deployed by racists, nationalists and dullards, any strategic deployment of these terms in a “positive essentialism” should maintain a watch over the ways these terms may be reified and become counter-productive even within the politics for which they are deployed. The “scrupulously visible political interest” proposed by Spivak<sup>45</sup> must do serious duty in the context of alliance formation with other groups in colour, class, sexuality and gender-based struggles.

Lowé cites Fanon’s recognition that any movement to dismantle colonialism faces the challenge of providing a “new order that does not reproduce the social structure of the old system” and the “assimilation to the dominant culture’s roles and positions by the emergent group, which would merely caricature the old colonialism.”<sup>46</sup> Fanon’s text about anti-colonial nationalism proves to be very instructive in the context of the so-called post-colonial, as elite and comprador classes seem to have failed exactly this challenge, and have done so, it would seem, by way of abandoning the Leninist project which required of revolutionaries that they first of all smash the state apparatus.

Schools, communications media, the legal system, etc., work to assimilate diverse differences in a melting pot public domain<sup>47</sup> which operates a rhetoric of equality or rights but consistently forgets and occludes the material inequalities that persist—for clear historical and political reasons—within that domain.<sup>48</sup> This is the same double trick, which suggests that the sale of labor power by the worker to the capitalist is a fair and free exchange. In the Culture Industry’s fascination with curry and corner shop, hip-hop and dreadlocks, and so on, it is possible to witness the cultural operation of this rhetoric of equality, which appreciates difference on the basis of an oblique blindness to inequality and material opportunity. The recognition of this contradiction, in which fetishized and celebrated “objects” of culture come to do duty for obscured social relations between really existing people, is a first, but insufficient, step towards a cultural politics.

While it is certainly necessary to take part in the fight against the ways inequalities are obscured by pluralist multiculturalism and its restricted notions of identity, we also need to take up a more militant and organised project which goes beyond this first step of learning to “think through the ways in which culture may be rearticulated. . . as a site for alternative histories and memories that provide the grounds to imagine subject, community, and prac-

tice in new ways."<sup>49</sup> It is also possible that the isolated announcement that culturalism enacts an exclusion of material reality is itself in danger of reinforcing that very exclusion, especially where the prescribed action is also culturalist, however strategic. What is missing here is how a culturalist politics can not just recognize real material issues but must actually attempt to do something about them. Lowe groups together "testimony, personal narrative, oral history, literature, film, visual arts, and other cultural forms as sites through which subject, community, and struggle are stratified and mediated" as "oppositional narratives." These "are crucial to the imagination and rearticulation of new forms of political subjectivity, collectivity, and practice."<sup>50</sup> But this "alternative politicization," on its own, is in danger of operating only a personnel change at the helm of the institutions of cultural management (dusky brethren curating the new museums, a few post-colonial superstars on the conference circuit, celebrated rap and sports personalities, but between these examples and the material reality of cultural operation exists the same difference between the service personnel of a five-star hotel and the international jet-setting guests). Lowe's occasional references to the formation of a "new" workforce "within the global reorganization of capitalism" which is "linked to an emergent political formation, organizing across race, class, and national boundaries" is offered in programmatic terms only at the end of the book but not detailed. The call remains for "alternative forms of cultural practice that integrate yet move beyond those of cultural nationalism"<sup>51</sup>; for "oppositional and contestatory" immigrant cultures, provoking contradictions which may be "critically politicized in cultural forms and practices" so as to be "utilized in the formation of alternative social practices"; as part of a "process based on strategic alliances between different sectors, not on their abstract identity"<sup>52</sup>; and to "propose, enact, and embody subjects and practices not contained by the narrative of American citizenship."<sup>53</sup>



While the "explicit dimension" of "Rap's cultural politics lie in its lyrical expression," Tricia Rose reminds us that alongside this, there are other important factors. It is the struggle over public space, meanings and interpretations that is critical in "contemporary cultural politics."<sup>54</sup> It is crucial to add that the struggle of Black Americans to claim public space is not one that is easily won, however large a percentage of the Billboard top 40 chart may be claimed

by Def Jam, and however much Rap provides the soundtrack for urban lives. The key problem here is that, as in—to use Rose’s own formulation—the case with cultural production in general, there is more than one context, more than one public, more than one interpretation and more than one struggle, many reactions, many things to say. This is the contradictory nature of the Cultural Industry—at the very same time as a struggle for meaning and space opens possibilities of articulation that were previously closed, the extension of “saying” into public space in a larger context can risk closing off other possibilities, or engaging a ventriloquy which speaks on behalf of others. That Apache Indian becomes the sole representative of Bhangra is a case in point: Bhangra, South Asian musics, even Apache himself, are much too complex to be glossed in this, albeit understandable in the context, fashion. The contradiction, which is to be kept in mind, is that progressive sounds in one space may become the agents of imperialism (and sales projections for Nike) in another.

The nature of commodity fetishism and the ever-multiplying fragmentation of “culture” and social relations into a million products in the market is what requires critical analysis. Difference is selling well on the display tables of tourism, technology, television and telemarketing. Difference is in style. Yet if we recall the ways these commodities (souvenirs, identities, bandwidth, melody—anything that can appear in the culture-vulture trade-house hall) are congealed social relations between people in, however refracted, communication with each other, we can begin to reconsider difference as something to be reclaimed, not as identity-product, but as a grounding for solidarity and unity.

The abundance and wealth of the capitalist world has been distributed, segmented, fragmented, hierarchized and stratified in ways that favor some at the expense of all. A few much more than some, some much more than the rest. The impediments to an immediate redistribution of productive powers and pleasures across the entire social spectrum is not a matter of limited resources, or insufficient capacity, but rather of division of will, of opportunist power-mongering, of marketing division for gain. The ways in which culture is theorized today as hybrid, diverse, full of differences, multicultural, polyversely plethoric, etc., must be immediately reappropriated from the abstract and fetishized marketized/mediatized reifications of social relations.

The envelope within which “identity politics” operates may certainly be pushed and widened by all the advocates of multi-



plicity and difference, but the flip-side of this development is the socialising of new accommodations to multanimous capitalism. We learn new ways to co-exist with the operation, rather than work for its overthrow. Multiculturalism is “business in drag,” as one wit called it with characteristic disconcert for the PC-ness of analogy. This critique of Hybridity is not one which rejects the creativity of bringing cultures together, mixing resources and sharing, exchanging, co-operating with ideas. The effervescence of creativity is premised—always—on such trading. That is not the point. To think that a celebration of the trade is sufficient is the problem. Celebration of multicultural diversity and fragmentation is exactly the logic of the mass market. A twisted version of unity in diversity where the unity is alienated and abstracted away from real relations between people and becomes relations between things. It has been thus for a very long time under capitalism. Indeed, this is its framing presence.

For all the good words and great critical books, articles, newspaper op-ed columns, right through to Asian-American visibility in literature and business, or to the cross-cultural alliance of South Asian musics with the “Black CNN” of rap and its message, through all this, the world socio-economic situation remains in large part unchanged. If anything, conditions for those excluded from bourgeois welfare are worse than they were. The mixture of multicultural good news and mixed lives lived under the wire—as seen for example in Mira Nair’s film *Mississippi Masala*—is not to be condemned in itself, but its articulation is insufficient and celebration of a few escapees from the exclusion machine does not make a politics. Just as hybrid creativity does not by itself pose a challenge to the brutalization of human life entailed in capitalist society, neither does an individual escape offer more than a partial fantastic exit. Much more is necessary. Visibility is not the marker of arrival. Opportunist space in the sun does not disrupt enough. What kinds of organizations are needed to build on the creativity of the hybrid challenges to capital? To what degree does the opportunity to rest comfortably minimize or undermine political engagement? How must organization combat this? When?

## Notes

The work behind this essay is collective, and comes out of a project initiated in Manchester, England, in 1994 and ongoing. There are four texts where the workings of this project may be found: the books *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: the Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996) and *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*

(Kaur and Hutnyk 1999), and special issues of the journals *Postcolonial Studies* (1:3) and *Theory Culture and Society* (forthcoming). Among those who have pushed my thinking on the particular issues of this paper are Virinder Kalra, Sanjay Sharma, Raminder Kaur, Tej Purewal, Aki Nawaz, Ashwani Sharma, Koushik Banerjea, Shirin Housee and Bobby Sayyid. I also thank Vijay Prashad for his trans-Atlantic (and beyond) influence and editorial clarity.

1. Paul Gilroy, "Black Cultural Politics: An Interview with Paul Gilroy by Timmy Lott" *Found Object* 4 (1994), 46-81, 54-55.
2. See Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1995).
3. Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 155.
4. *Ibid.*, 156.
5. This phrase is from an unpublished paper by Koushik Banerjea, forthcoming in *Theory, Culture and Society* (London: 2000).
6. *Eastern Eye*, January 3, 1998
7. "Introduction," *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma, eds. (London: Zed Books, 1996), 1.
8. See John Hutnyk, "Music Politics Research Culture" in *Critique of Anthropology* 16:4 (1996), 425.
9. See Les Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*, (London: UCL Press, 1996).
10. Somini Sengupta, "To Be Young, Asian and Hip," *New York Times*, June 30, 1996.
11. See Sunaina Maira, "Desis Reprazent: Bhangra Remix and Hip Hop in New York City" in *Postcolonial Studies* 1:3 (1998), 357-370.
12. "Kalkutta Calling: Madonna's Neue Kleider," *Rolling Stone*, August 1998, German language edition.
13. This is made explicit in the case of the self-defence and spatial politics of much South Asian music from Britain. See Virinder Kalra, John Hutnyk, and Sanjay Sharma, "Re-Sounding (Anti)Racism, or Concor-dant Politics? Revolutionary Antecedents" in *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, 127-150.
14. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 26.
15. On the other side of the Atlantic, U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair commends South Asian businessmen for developing cash and carry, catering and so on, and for having made Britain "richer as a result." Blair was speaking at a dinner for Britain's 200 Richest Asians, sponsored by the *Eastern Eye* magazine. Cherie Blair wore a vote-winning sari. The year before she had borrowed one, improving in 1998 with a specially designed number from a respected fashion house [for more on this, see Virinder Kalra and John Hutnyk, "Brimful of Agita-

- tion, Authenticity and Appropriation: Madonna's 'Asian Kool'" *Postcolonial Studies* 3 (1998), 339-356].
16. Lowe, 22.
  17. I believe this bogey is a shibboleth adopted from Stuart Hall's work. Elsewhere I want to show that Hall's "Marxism without Guarantees" relies upon the rejection of an "orthodox" Marxism most prominently displayed in the U.K. context by pseudo-Trotskyite sects (middle class self-declared vanguards whose patronizingly simplistic exhortations to the working class must embarrass most workers). It is not the case that Marxism was ever so guaranteed, though it is not difficult to see why Hall was provoked to the position he took.
  18. Lowe, 33.
  19. *Ibid.*, 25.
  20. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *The Labour of Dionysus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
  21. Lowe, 39-40.
  22. *Ibid.*, 40.
  23. *Ibid.*, 41.
  24. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 73.
  25. *Ibid.*, 81-2.
  26. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1990), 66, cited in Chambers, 82.
  27. Chambers says that "to talk of authenticity has invariably involved referring to tradition as an element of closure and conservation, as though peoples and cultures existed outside the languages and time." He prefers to "move in the traffic between. . . worlds [of cultures, arts and individuals], caught in the sights sounds and languages of hybridity," Chambers, 82.
  28. *Ibid.*
  29. *Ibid.*, 85.
  30. *Ibid.*, 87.
  31. *Ibid.*, 86.
  32. Timothy Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York: Routledge 1997), 21.
  33. *Ibid.*, 168.
  34. William Eric Perkins, ed., *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 269.
  35. *Ibid.*, 259.
  36. Taylor, 159.
  37. *Ibid.*, 162.

38. *Ibid.*, 163.
39. *Ibid.*, 157. This is unintentionally amusing—the idea that “many” of the billions subject under Empire might turn up in Britain would certainly swamp the small percentage there at present (India’s population 900 million, Asians in Britain, under 1 million). Of course the free movement of people would be a good thing—forcing a serious rethink of “race relations.” For the moment Fortress Europe conditions prevail.
40. See Back, *New Ethnicities*, for another discussion of this.
41. Taylor, 158.
42. Dick Hebdige, “Digging for Britain: An Excavation in Seven Parts” in Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindenberg, eds., *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 139.
43. See Sanjay Sharma and Shirin Housee, “‘Too Black, Too Strong?’ Anti-Racism and the Making of South Asian Political Identities in Britain” in Tim Jordan and Adam Lent, eds., *Storming the Millennium: The Politics of Change* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998).
44. Angela Davis, “Interview” in Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
45. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 205.
46. Lowe, 72.
47. *Ibid.*, 86. “Multiculturalism is central to the maintenance of a consensus that permits the present hegemony, a hegemony that relies on a premature reconciliation of contradiction and persistent distractions away from the historically established incommensurability of the economic, political and cultural spheres.”
48. *Ibid.*, 144. “In the United States, pluralism admits the existence of differences, yet it requires conformity to a public culture that tends to subordinate alternative cultures. . . hence, the important antagonisms of racial and ethnic immigrant cultures to the state in counterhegemonic critiques that do not exclusively reproduce pluralist arguments of inclusion and rights.”
49. *Ibid.*, 96.
50. *Ibid.*, 158.
51. *Ibid.*, 171.
52. *Ibid.*, 172.
53. *Ibid.*, 176.
54. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 124.