

This article has been published in: Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman, eds., *Reconstructing Hybridity. Postcolonial Studies in Transition*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2207, 43-58.
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White Fatigue, or, Supplementary Notes on Hybridity

Sabine Broeck

It is the composite reality of the bastard that obsesses Glissant, not the longing for a remote paternity. (Dash)

Metropolitan hybridity is underwritten by the stable regime of western secular identity and the authenticity that goes with it, whereas post-colonial hybridity has no such guarantess. (Radhakrishnan)

Colonial desire: a furtive fascination with miscegenation and inter-racial transgression. (Dust jacket blurb)

Introduction

I want to begin with two anecdotes, one from the American context, the other – personal one – straight out of Frankfurt. Here is the first one, lifted from the journal *Race Traitor*, from their Spring 1994 issue:

According to press reports and our own correspondents, the white race is showing signs of fracture in the rural midwest. Several white female students at North Newton Junior-Senior High School near Morocco, Indiana, who call themselves the “Free to Be Me Group,” recently started braiding their hair in dreadlocks and wearing baggy jeans and combat boots, a style identified with Hip-Hop culture. Morocco is a small farming town seventy miles south of Chicago; of the 850 students at the school, two are black. (Ignatiev and Garvey 1)

The journal editors go on to describe that and how the group was subjected to the most violent and hateful harassment, how the school community suffered death threats, a bomb scare and a Ku Klux Klan rally; some of the girls in braids were directly physically attacked by Klanspeople. Some of the girls were suspended from school for violating the school’s dress codes, others have withdrawn, including one of the black kids. The incident reveals, in the editors’ conclusion, “the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine both white solidarity and (white) male authority” (Ignatiev and Garvey n.p.).

My second anecdote does not contain the same level of violence but also spotlights those aspects of hybridity I am interested to discuss. Last summer when I picked up my son from his kindergarden, another kid followed us onto the street, calling us to stop because he wanted to see who was Youssou’s mother. After staring at us for a while he blurted out rather aggressively: “You are impossible! You don’t fit together!” Registering our incomprehension, he started his chant across the street: “Black and white don’t go together” and yelled at me: “you ought to have a white child!”

As might be extrapolated from the gist of those anecdotes I will be concerned with a signifying field that encompasses a range of pronouncements from cultural celebrations of hybridity to individual and social negotiations of material instances of embodied hybridity to

academic articulations of hybridity.¹ A number of representations may function interchangeably here for my purposes: creolization,² impure cultures, bastardization, mongrelisation, cultural mestizaje or métissage – the parallel connotations of the series are significant: there has been a striking shift in the metaphorical weight of those terms from pejorative degradation to idealization, even to an aggrandizement similar to the re-evaluation of “black” in the 1960s, or “queer” after Stonewall. Robert Young has provided useful genealogy for the conceptual development of those mixing terms in two of his books, tracing the deployment of hybridity and creolisation as theoretical signifiers in cultural theory to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of the interplay of “mute” and “intentional” hybridization in language systems.³ Young of course credits Homi K. Bhabha’s early essay of 1985 “Signs Taken for Wonders” which heavily, though not explicitly leans on Bakhtin’s work with paving the way for the widespread deployment of hybridity as a concept in the Western academic world. Young mentions Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of “creolization” in passing (see *Colonial* 21) but the crucial impact of Caribbean influences, the earlier articulations of Antillanité, in Edouard Glissant’s phrase, does not receive due attention (see Ostendorf).

‘Reality of the Bastard’

One of the first intellectuals to circulate the Bakhtinian concepts adapted to the particular Caribbean situation was Edouard Glissant in 1973.⁴ Glissant’s “poétique de la relation” appears, instantly transformed by the transferral into the American (language)context, as “Cross-Cultural poetics.” J. Michael Dash, the editor of the American collection of Glissant’s essays, *Caribbean Discourse*, describes Glissant’s project as a preoccupation with an “exuberance, of ecstasy, that is an imaginative departure from the shipwrecked, petrified condition of the colonized mind” and sees Glissant’s contribution as an attempt to “conceive of a new solidarity or métissage (creolization).” Glissant himself seems to be indeed focussed, in Dash’s phrasing, on the “composite reality of the bastard (instead of) a remote paternity” (xli). In his essays, however, he seems a lot more concerned with the painful memory and long-term consequences of the cultural contact Caribbean peoples have been submitted to than with exuberant abandon. He repeatedly refers his readers to the price that was exacted by the historical processes of creolization, and to the ambivalences carried by a theoretical concept of cultural mixing rooted in such historical violence. While he acknowledges it as an epistemological strength, or advance, that “[c]omposite peoples, those who could not deny or mask their hybrid composition, nor sublimate it in the notion of mythical pedigree, do not ‘need’ the notion of Genesis, because they do not need the myth of pure lineage” and maintains that “the idea of creolization demonstrates that henceforth it is no longer valid to glorify ‘unique’ origins that the race safeguards and prolongs,” he also sees a necessity to “deconstruct [...] the ‘category’ of creolized that is considered halfway between two ‘pure’ extremes” thus indicating his awareness of the ideological racist baggage of the very term. Even at his time of writing, the term “cross-cultural contact” has “also become an argument for assimilationist propaganda” on the part of the French powers that be (Glissant 140, 141).

Hybridity as a concept may thus be traced to an eager interest on the part of cultural anthropology and later, postcolonial studies to ‘read’ the Caribbean as one of postmodernity’s chronotopes of instructive value. As Bill Schwarz suggests in “Memories of Empire” for the British context:

The Caribbean possesses a significant hold on these discussions. Not only does the passage from the West Indies to the cold realities of actually existing England fashions

it own perceptions, but the deeper history of the Caribbean as a peculiar distillation of America, Europe and Africa resonates with contemporaneity. [...] [I]t is a history full of complexity, not easily conforming to the lived expectations of roots. Indeed, the contending, dissonant historical times which have gone into the making of Caribbean identities in the moment of modernity compel us to think in terms of ‘heteroglossia’ and hybridity – of the collision of distinct histories producing new forms. (156)

That is to say, the Bakhtinian notions could at this point function as adept epistemology of/for cultures that have been embedded in social/historical constellations characterized by *violent* displacement and replacement of peoples, and are cast now in a hybridity owed to the Middle Passage, as Glissant insists (94, 95), creatively trying to come to terms with a particularly aggressive effect of modernity. The concept seems to me to have had particular resonance and usefulness in that respect; recently, however, it has circulated but as a “circumatlantic,” to borrow Berndt Ostendorf’s vocabulary, ubiquitous metaphor. Ostendorf, who offers a fully developed recontextualization of the term “creolité,” including an fascinating semiological description, has cautioned the interested reader to beware of the inherent and inevitable oscillation of terms like “creole.”. Shored up by the academic popularity of theorists like Bhabha, Ulf Hannerz, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sara Suleri, Ann DuCille, Anne McClintock, Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Rosi Braidotti – to call on just a few leading proponents – the concept entered the Western academic theory business. To quote Ostendorf:

Two trends increased the attractiveness: First, globalization and the economic range of and interest in world systems has deparochialized the historiography of the New World. Secondly the rise, after the national emancipation of African and Caribbean countries, of a sense of local perspective and of local merit has brought into focus the many local, creolized cultures of the Atlantic system. [...] Ulf Hannerz suggests that one aspect of globalization may be creolization which has triggered a new global interest in flux, culture contact and diversity. Hence there is a new need of finding terms that would conceptualize such a multicultural diversification. Creole as a concept was found useful in ‘domesticating’ diversity, in making ‘pluralism’ lose its otherness and go native. (25)

Accordingly, hybridity’s currency in all sorts of discourses ranging from arguments about the postcolonial condition to remapping American culture to Western philosophy to postcolonial musicology has been disseminated to the point of saturating even rather casual academic communication. How globalisation produces hybridity as a *sine qua non* of our contemporaneity but also in turn feeds on it, has been pervasively debated in postcolonial studies, whereas the ideological freight of hybridity as epistemological metaphor has not been as widely acknowledged.

This seems to be of particular urgency, however, as Young has argued in *Colonial Desire*. For him the “steamy mixture” of nineteenth-century racial theories of hybridization encoded the sexual traffic in the colonies as both “mirror [...] and consequence” of a colonial economy of trading posts and slave ships, of an “an exchange of bodies as of goods, or rather of bodies as goods” (*Colonial* 181). He concludes that:

It was therefore wholly appropriate that sexual exchange, and its miscegenated product, which captures the violent, antagonistic power relations of sexual and cultural diffusion, should become the dominant paradigm through which the passionate economic and political trafficking of colonialism was conceived. Perhaps this begins to explain why our own forms of racism remain so intimately bound up with sexuality and desire. The

fantasy of postcolonial cultural theory, however, is that those in the Western academy at least have managed to free themselves from this hybrid commerce of colonialism, as from every other aspect of the colonial legacy. (*Colonial* 182)

As Young so articulately argues, hybridity is a concept whose genealogy we cannot afford to forget; its name cannot be metaphorically transferred into other cultural realms unproblematically. Even if, as Young also concedes, the term might be used in all good (and progressive) faith, the referential grounds of the metaphor remain laid out in (enforced) breeding, or mis-breeding, precisely in miscegenation and, more often than not, in a dispossession of generations. Young's analysis shows that in the early nineteenth-century formulations of cultural contact, the

historical links between language and sex were fundamental. Both produced what were regarded as 'hybrid' forms (creole, pidgin and miscegenated children) which were seen to embody threatening forms of perversion and degeneration and became the basis for endless metaphoric extension in the racial discourse of social commentary. (*Colonial* 5)

The potential meaning of degeneracy carried involuntarily by the term hybridity is being dealt with rather flippantly by its contemporary conflation with carnival and contestation. Glissant's argument, by contrast, situated as it is within the colonial power hierarchy, has to work through this inherited meaning that tries to silence his creolized voice: "According to traditional (French) textbooks, Creole is a patois that is incapable of abstract thought and therefore unable to convey knowledge" (182). This freighted legacy of alleged infertility (in literal and metaphorical terms) is forced underground, becomes the always already suppressed element as soon as terms like hybridity, or creolité blissfully appear in white western based theory that refuses to acknowledge a historical perspective – a mistake that Young criticizes Bhabha for even in his early *White Mythologies*. Enunciated from a location of (white) western intellectuality, the rhetorical figure of hybridity, even though it contains traces of its original referent of hybridity in the material shape of bastardized life, does not show any prominent interest to address that condition of hybridity in the flesh, or in historical location.

I want to read, for its exemplary character, the introduction to a special issue of *Paragraph* (1995) on Practices of Hybridity. The editor Mireille Rosello introduces a volume of essays describing, and also constituting those hybrid, or hybridizing practices, ranging from the black voice in mainstream news to the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 in Paris to the "critic as tourist." Language (or better, the play of signification) is once again being brought back to desire (detour Bakhtin's and Bhabha's rather more abstract and brainy occupations), and vice versa, the jouissance of "disrespectful dubbing" connected to the fascination of oxymoronic sexy businessmen. One could say history has caught up with Rosello's phrasing, bringing in through the semantic cracks the old value of hybridity as lure and threat of illegitimacy:

Even if it still belongs to the domain of the yet unimagined, the de-listing imperative is one of the possible practices of hybridity, and the following articles are all fascinated by events, narratives or cultural phenomena that contribute to the dispersing of prefabricated lists [*which construct normative identities*; emphasis added]. When journalists disrespectfully dub professional businessmen 'hiphop bankers,' the apparently oxymoronic quality of the phrase reveals that an implicit list of legitimate attributes is being tampered with by the practices adopted by the bankers in question [...]. And as Paulette Caldwell's analysis of their story shows, the new hybrid

relationships created between hiphop culture and capitalism, between generations and genders, between the media and their objects of scrutiny, are worth elucidating. (2, 3)

On the one hand, Rosello's argument attests to an advance in Western mobility, colourfulness and an ironical tolerance of paradoxes. The genealogy of hybridity, however, inevitably haunts the *Paragraph* issue: beyond wishful celebratory phantasies hybridity's legacy of colonialism will as necessarily be shored up as will its contemporary charge of postcolonial imperial relations. Thus, Glissant's poetics of relation and Gilroy's transatlantic diasporas do make an oblique appearance, quoted to support "the value of hybrid dialogues between hybrid and creolized individuals." In this reference to precursor theories, the "underside" of hybridity will be allowed: "Hybridity is not the present that displaces a more violent and unacceptable past, it is a form of attention to the return of the colonial repressed under the guise of new and improved scientific categories, groups, classes and lists" (Rosello 9).

Swallowing up this referential allusion, however, Rosello's line-up of the commandeering, but interchangeable connotations of hybridity sound strangely timeless, and disinvested in particular locations: disidentification, de-listing, inventing identities, the but hitherto suppressed creolization of "our own" culture, the "hybrid parts in each of us," "hybridity as a reinvention of forms of belonging," "the idea of practising hybridity as an attempt at renouncing the 'add-on' strategy" of multiculturalism. In the following phrases, hybridity appears to have been finally cut loose from any referential grounds and indeed floats as a signifier for an effort to articulate the intellectual and psychic gains for "ourselves" of sublating subtle distinctions between "repressed" and "continuous," between "other cultures" (whatever that may signify in detail?) in some alleged practical sense and the effects of "theory." The levelling of discriminations between categories of such necessary particularities as "tragedy," "nostalgia," "pleasure" or "empowerment" makes way for the mobilizing spectacle of various allegedly factual, if unconscious instances of hybridity we are surrounded by:

The conceptualization of repressed creolity and continuing creolization within ourselves, whether it is taught to us by our everyday encounter with other cultures or by the everyday encounter with theory, may be the first stage of hybrid thinking, the second stage being the discovery of the different levels of tragedy, conflicts but also enjoyment, pleasure, nostalgia and empowerment involved in each specific sites of (more or less amnesiac) creolisation. (Rosello 5)

But alas, in the "real" world, however postmodern, echoes of Bakhtin's novelistic carnivalesque momentum may be sounded, but factual fulfillment is hard to come by: "Perhaps even more rarely does the hybrid part of each of us, whether amnesiac or active, have a chance to engage in a hybrid dialogue with other hybrids" (Rosello 6).

What tends to get lost in those enthusiastic formulations of hybridity as condition postmoderne are delicate nuances within hybridity: the question whether hybridity is chosen or imposed, accepted or rejected is decisive but often remains hidden under a certain aesthetization of the phenomenon. It should be stressed, however, that the difference between a hybridity shaped by an ambiguous relationship between creative opportunities and mourning that Glissant proposed (xxviii) and an hybridity of ecstatic acquisition of multiplicity cannot be foregone – and the social positions from where one may or may not feel interpellated into either one possibility may not be taken up voluntaristically. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*:

As a descriptive catch-all term, ‘hybridity’ fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity: colonial imposition, obligatory assimilation, political cooptation, cultural mimicry and so forth. Elites have always made top-down raids on subaltern cultures, while the dominated have always ‘signified’ and parodied as well as simulated elite practice. Hybridity, in other words, is power-laden and asymmetrical. (43)

A lot of the recent hype with hybridity disregards the necessary relation of different articulations of hybridity to different subject positions on the race, class and gender spectrums. All individuals or social groups partaking in “practices of hybridity” – even if I go along with the term for the moment – do not, beyond location in time and space, share the same subject position via their very being supposedly hybridized. Western white intellectuals (the “we” the *Paragraph* introduction keeps addressing rather exclusively) have a rather particular position from which to speak – owing not only to colonial history, as Young reminds us, but also to our contemporary quite parasitical relation to most of the world’s population. The consequences of a global shifting around of populations – even if it means the “empire coming home to roost” and has produced the colourful faces and tunes of Western metropolises – do not qualify as spectacles of hybridity, as in Rosello’s “tragedy” lined up with the bankers’ postmodern and urbane consumerist taste flexibility.

I suggest that the articulation of modernity’s and postmodernity’s hybridity should not fix white intellectuals in a desire to partake in its hip “presence to the times” (Allison 439) but instead prompt a tracing and notation of that mobile white energy, its particular investments in and responsibility for hybridity, historically, and presently. Accordingly – if the hybrid, or the condition of hybridity, should not remain a freshly convenient term for the white West’s seductive other – a theorization of hybridity cannot forego a theorization of whiteness. Stuart Hall has asserted with a certain glee that a hybrid like himself has arrived at embodying the center position and seems to have relegated – in intellectual attention at least – the previous white center to a melancholic self-identification as marginalized (114).

White on White

Hall’s observation points to – but does not fully take on – this problematic. Can white men jump?⁵ Can white women enjoy their bodies? Pointing out white feminist critical trajectories’ desire for a “rearticulation of the body and its passions” Elisabeth Abel’s reading of inter-racial communication between black and white women critics⁶ bespeaks a white disinvestment to share in the “hideous personal deficiencies” of a “race without skin”, as the “quintessence of lack” as Alice Walker, among others, has phrased it dauntingly. The cultural/social phenomena encoded in these questions bespeak a specific *fin de siècle* fatigue in the western subject with the constraints (real or imagined) of being white and a postmodern remake of modernism’s preoccupation with so-called primitivism. My contention is that “we” (white feminist or progressives of diverse orientations) should begin to unflinchingly address this perception of “lack” and take “our” desire to transcend it seriously enough to examine whiteness as a white (wo)man’s burden. Without resorting to fast and easy fixes on the question, or to guilt-tripping sentimentality “we” need to work through the question of white embodiment. Which psychosexual and cultural impossibilities has the history of whiteness in the West created to prevent visceral and spiritual “fullness”? What might be the possible kernel of truth in the old and new assumptions of “white coldness,” and how is white privilege tied into it, and do we really want to know? This problematic needs to be faced white on white, I think, and not displaced by or evaded with identificatory turns to hybridity.

This return to, and not a more or less lazy displacement of “colonial desire” seems urgent to me. In a way, one could argue that the fascination with hybridity has replaced, in some – mostly academic – circles, the modernist shiver a Josephine Baker could send down white audience’s spines, but with a vengeance. This time “we” (as in Rosello’s argument) may partake in the oscillating and energizing otherness without being called on our biographical and sociographical legacies of racism.

If “hybridity” signifies a crisis of homogeneity, how do white people relate their whiteness to that crisis? The reverse side of the lure is the sense of being threatened, generating a range of responses from denial to fascist aggression against cultural mixing, sexual license, and general impure degeneration, to obsessive claims to an unsoiled whiteness; hence insults like the one against the three year old not to be the same as his mother. To “fit one’s mother” becomes essential to Germans whose laws of guaranteeing Germanhood only to children of German birth has until the recent influx of “hybridising” elements like marriageable African men, guaranteed an almost total and automatic equation of Germanness and whiteness. Thus, beyond the realm of intellectual liberal delight in hybridization white Germans’ cultural and political reactions to it are by no means predictable.

If contexts like this are not established, the hybridity discourse may serve to displace, and actually neutralize theoretical and activist labor against racialisation and racism. This is as pertinent to the American debate about multiculturalism and the newly discovered old “hybridity” of US American culture as it is to any considerations of a happily hybridized European community. The recent zoom on hybridity in American Studies figures as a poignant example. Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s 1990s mapping essay in celebration of American culture as a hybrid, synergetic, intimate and jazzed up dialectic of black and white not only obscures more radical, not so sexy 1970s investigations of the power of “blanchitude,” in Sylvia Wynter’s words, to “[inscribe] the globe, coding value and non-value, binding the structures of production under the hegemony of its imaginary social significations” (Wynter 150). It also delights in a revived jeremiadism of hybridity as a metasignifier for an American vision of mixed national energy without brakes, a project which nonchalantly misses to address an actual resurge of racism, class struggle from above and the formation of the nationalistic Right.

It is of course an overdue insight that cultural identities and subject positions have never been inherently pure – except: For some people drawn into the transformations of globalization they are a lot more impure than for Western white people in positions of relative affluence, relative social peace and relative cultural hegemony. Bhabha’s dream of “the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (*Location* 4) – could only be envisioned if the power relations at work in the production of hybridity are unveiled. Who mixes what, with whom, with what result, for what reasons, motives, and interests at what historical moment, in what contexts? These are the questions that need to be constantly reraised to avoid a history-less fetishization of the metaphor. The celebration of hybridity always threatens to get stuck in an intellectual version of bastard chique, as one of the compensations white western intellectuals have, after the nomad, the homeless, the exiled, the stranger, the tourist, the bricoleur and the margin dweller, paraded as New World paradigms to “moan the crisis, the fragmentation and loss of the Western subject or to re-vitalize its standing,” in Heike Paul’s words.

R. Radhakrishnan’s reminder of the tacit difference behind metropolitan and postcolonial versions of hybridity supports that point succinctly. He sharply criticizes “avant-garde theories” rejoicing in the opportunities hybridity offers to “decenter identity regimes,” pretending to a “subject-less hybridity” which has to deny its own embeddedness in the structures and discourses of the “dominant West [...] comfortably ensconced in the heartland of both national and transnational citizenship” (753). Accordingly, his satirical parade of

“European hybridity, French hybridity, American hybridity” points to the crucial lack in those figuralities: the blank of whiteness within a paradigm like hybridity needs to be inscribed; romancing the hybrid will not suffice.

To acknowledge whiteness entails, most of all, a political gesture, as different from, for example, individual cultural preferences. For white music audiences, for example, to prefer hip hop, jazz or Youssou N’Dour over and against their “proper” musical heritage does not effect a change in/of a white subject position beyond decisions of personal taste. Granted an erosive, seductive power of crossover styles to perform nagging doubt on the transparency of social, cultural and national identities, there is no self-hybridization by way of surrounding oneself with commodities, intellectual or otherwise. Nor by way of phantasizing oneself hybrid. An academically installed intellectual, born and raised in England, having lived in Istanbul (or even Zaire, for that matter) for some terms, and then going on to teach in Berlin will not thereby foresake her white western subject position. She may be more cosmopolitan-minded and aware of the world outside the hermetically sealed white environment of, say, a British university some decades ago, but that does not change her status in a global social and political economy, it does not alter her positions on the global scales of production, distribution and consumption of wealth and knowledge. Neither does it make that person in any way as equally hybridized by a life-in-difference, by sometimes antagonistic cultural and social interpellations as an impoverished Pakistani family, belonging to the class of workers in “precarious economies” as Pierre Bourdieu has called it appropriately (13), whose parents, children and grandchildren by the end of the 1990s are scattered in places like Switzerland, Italy, England, the USA and/or an African country, holding on to their respective positions mostly by bare thread. Neither to political asylum seekers, to the refugees trying to survive in camps all over the African continent, nor to African legal or illegal immigrants without any formal education to sell on the European job market. Neither to Black women working for Indian households in Alabama, to Eritrean de-classed immigrants dishwashing all over Europe, nor to Croats delivering themselves to illegal border trade with human beings, seeking to make a more peaceful life in Canada. Though there might be a certain parallel in class positions, not even a close similarity to the hybridized existence of an African academic at an American university, or a top notch female scientist from India working for a Paris-based international company may be taken for granted.

My literal “figuring” here of different instances of hybridization versus a status of un-interrogated white privilege is, of course, strategical, as is its rhetorics of hybridity in the flesh calculated to weigh the free-for-all abundance of “hybridizing practices” with a reference to material conditions that Rosello’s “we” precisely do not share. I do not want to imply – in rather mechanistic fashion – that a white subject position per se does not allow for the agency to self-deconstruct. Indeed, as my first anecdote proves, the lines between a playful engagement with those “hybridizing practices” the *Paragraph* introduction revels in and an effective surrender of privilege might be hard to draw, all the more so since individual white subjects may not be left alone with their innocent desires. As my anecdotes also demonstrate white privilege is not safely untouchable by the social body of Western societies, and the question who polices the boundaries of how whiteness may appear, exactly how much “impurity” western societies are willing to take, is far from being settled. Organized efforts at re-purification that may be witnessed over the last ten years in all European and North-American societies by militant defenders of white and Western homogeneity cannot in the long run be countered by a wilfull up-staging of transgression – even though the effects of the performative bliss may be maddening enough for some. It will become crucial to patiently deconstruct the legacy of “our” white national and individual histories and to name “our” implications in the social construction of white dominance in order to refuse being interpellated into a socially forceful nostalgia for (white) normalcy.

Conclusion

To own one's whiteness as a decisive composite of a Western positionality means to acknowledge privilege, to become conscious of entitlement: conscious of a certain position in the – national and global – traffic of empowerment (or destruction) within the hierarchies of structural domination. As Richard Dyer in his seminal 1988 Screen article “White” has observed, whiteness is a social construction flaunting innocence of its particularity and of its own power; figuring paradoxically as “emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death” while at the same time reading its own existence as “coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity.” Dyer’s critique focuses on the dialectic by which white domination is reproduced by the way that white people colonize the definition of normal: “If the invisibility of whiteness colonizes the definitions of other norms – class, gender, heterosexuality, nationality, and so on – it also masks whiteness as itself a category” (44). This category then, a characteristic cultural/historical construction, is, in turn, achieved through white domination. To examine how specific white subject positions partake in, or could possibly subvert that white domination; to bracket, as it were, their own whiteness and to make visible the complicities and suppressions of white subject positions in culturally valent narratives, appears as a challenging, and promising task.

Whiteness studies have at this point become a “humanities subfield” as David Stowe (68) has called it.⁷ While there seems to me a treacherous solipcism involved in white scholars “doing” whiteness, especially if decades of Black Studies work on racialisation and racism go unregarded, the project is commendable to the same extent that men have gained insight from confronting their own genderedness and the politics of gender. As with gender, racial belonging and – in the case of whiteness – the social parasitism involved in any uninterrogated acceptance of its naturalness cannot voluntaristically be transcended, however productive (and seductive) the desire for defection into hybrid practices might appear to white intellectuals tired of the demanding prerogatives of Western culture.

Instead of relying on often dubious processes of hybridization, I would like to side with Mary Louise Pratt’s metaphor of the “contact zone,” with a strong emphasis on the “arts” required to move in it. There might be a place at that metaphorical table where experiences of fragmentation may be exchanged, practices of cultural fusion might be enjoyed in difference and common lessons of living down postmodernity might be had, like the ones Toni Morrison’s observations on the indebtedness of postmodern societies to a history of slavery, colonial dispossession and human division might teach us:

In terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the 19th century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. [...] These strategies of survival made the truly modern person. They’re a response to predatory western phenomena. (Gilroy 221)

I suggest, though, to temper transgressive exuberance with some white humility: the historical baggage we come with will take up a lot of space at that table which, it seems to me, we ought to be delicately asking for, instead of assuming it in the guise of “our” hybridity.

Notes

¹ The question if and to what extent there is, or why there does not generally exist a political field of hybridity deserves attention on its own but cannot be dealt with within the frame of this article. See Radhakrishnan.

² See Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, “In Praise” and “Creolité.”

³ The second parallel route the concept of ‘creolité’ has taken to enter literary, cultural and sociological postmodern theorizing is through linguistics, even though that genealogy is not generally acknowledged (see Ostendorf).

⁴ In lectures at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1973) and at the First International Symposium on Ethnopoetics of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (1975).

⁵ The reference is of course to the 1980s film: *White Men Can't Jump* (dir. Ron Shelton).

⁶ Which – so the gist of Abel’s argument – fostered a post-poststructuralist turn to black and minority women’s writing where a fuller, and more vibrant body, as it were could be ascertained in white perception.

⁷ See most recently Broeck, Daniels, Fine et.al., Mullen, and Outlaw as well as *The White Issue of Transition* by Appiah et al.

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