

# HYBRIDITY

Limits,  
Transformations,  
Prospects

Anjali Prabhu

## HYBRIDITY

SUNY series

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EXPLORATIONS  
*in*  
POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

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*Limits, Transformations, Prospects*

ANJALI PRABHU

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*For Keslav*

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[Der Mensch] ist ein freier und gesicherter Bürger der Erde, denn er ist an eine Kette gelegt, die lang genug ist, um ihm alle irdischen Räume frei zu geben, und doch nur so lang, dass nichts ihn über die Grenzen der Erde reisen kann. Gleichzeitig aber ist er auch ein freier und gesicherter Bürger des Himmels, denn er ist auch an eine ähnlich berechnete Himmelskette gelegt. Will er nun auf die Erde, drosselt ihn das Halsband des Himmels, will er in der Himmel, jenes der Erde. Und trotzdem hat er alle Möglichkeiten und fühlt es; ja, er weigert sich sogar, das Ganze auf einen Fehler bei der ersten Fesselung zurückzuführen.

—Franz Kafka (Das Paradies, 1947)

[Man] is a free citizen of the world, for he is fettered to a chain which is long enough to give him the freedom of all earthly space, and yet only so long that nothing can drag him past the frontiers of the world. But simultaneously he is a free and secure citizen of Heaven as well, for he is also fettered by a similarly designed heavenly chain. So that if he heads, say, for the earth, his heavenly collar throttles him, and if he heads for Heaven, his earthly one does the same. And yet all the possibilities are his, and he feels it; more, he actually refuses to account for the deadlock by an error in the original fettering.

## PREFACE

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From the minute I set foot on Mauritian soil in August of 1997 to research my dissertation, I was forced to reconsider my Indianness, and to do so repeatedly. At my preliminary exam before this, when Fredric Jameson asked me how my Indianness was going to play out on my trip to Mauritius, I was puzzled—even vaguely annoyed. I arrived with my four-month old son in a carrier on my back, a huge suitcase full of baby things and a few changes of clothes for myself, another full of books and papers, and all the enthusiasm of discovering what one of my mentors called the “exceptionalism” of her native Mauritius (Lionnet “Créolité in the Indian Ocean” 107).

Several people at the Seewoosagar Ramgoolam International airport seemed curious about my arrival. Almost all the passengers waiting for their luggage appeared to know each other. It was mostly (Mauritian) Indians who started up conversation with me, asking where I was going, what I was doing, but mostly where I was *from*. All were horrified that I was unaccompanied except for my child, some disbelieving that I was not Mauritian and, therefore, even angry that I did not speak Creole, others nodding that I must be from Réunion even though I said I was Indian and lived in the U.S. In the midst of all this they watched censoriously as I hauled the heavy suitcases off the ramp, declined help, hoisted the baby carrier onto my back, and made my way out of the terminal. One driver, whom I later came to know as Mr. Saubourah, literally ordered me into his cab as I made my way uncertainly through the crowd of people outside. I remain grateful to him and Mme Saubourah who, between them, became my babysitter, buffer, chaperone, solver-of-problems. Although disapproving of many things I did and said, he took me under his wing and saw me through various unusual and sometimes startling situations I will not have the opportunity to recount here.

My Indianness became an issue for many Mauritian Indians I encountered: at the Mauritius archives, at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, in interacting with students at the university, when I wanted to rent an apartment, or when people met me casually. I was chastised for wearing cotton saris (rather

than the synthetic ones judged to be fashionable), for wearing jeans, for not having a clear Indian ethnicity and “mother-tongue” (Are you “tamoul”? Not at all, then why do you speak Tamil? Only half Konkan? What is Konkan? Malayali also? Grandmother speaking French?), for being married to a German, for arriving without him. I was repeatedly told that India was full of poverty and in Mauritius poverty did not exist. Nor did the diseases that India was riddled with. Yet, the very obvious fascination with some “authentic” Indianness that I could not uphold was brought home to me on these occasions. People looked askance at me for speaking French and not Creole, for not having a properly recognizable accent (to them) in French or English and thus followed up any conversation with numerous questions to ascertain my identity. I was somewhat forgiven because I could speak, read, and write Tamil and particularly Hindi. (It was the one time I was grateful to the Indian government for having made Hindi a compulsory subject and the national language despite the agitation from Tamil Nadu, where I am from, before and through the time I worked my way through the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education system.) Matters were somewhat toned down for the two weeks when my “Indian” father, arrived to meet his grandson, much to the approval of the same Mauritians I had met. He was respectably from India and clearly and unambiguously Konkan to them (and himself!).

Mauritian Indians were consistently interested in knowing if I was “Brahman,” some prefacing it with the fact that they were “practicing Brahman.” They wanted to know how my parents had reacted to my marrying a “white” man. On occasion, I wept angry tears after neighbors or even passers-by stopped in or brought others to see my son—whom by now I saw consciously as half-white, half-Indian—at odd times of day or night, when I was just managing to sit down and catch up on my day’s notes or other chores because he was asleep. I could not turn them away because they always proffered some sort of “gift,” making sure to reiterate that they remained “Indian” and remembered the “Indian way of hospitality.” While it is now more common to see new unions (as opposed to the colonially created “Anglo-Indian” population) between whites and Indians in India, racial intermarriage is still certainly an issue there as well, even if in a different way.

In retrospect, however, the source of my tears was less the obvious frustration of being interrupted than the shattering of my utopian idea of what hybridity might mean in the real world. No doubt, attitudes have changed even since this recent sojourn in Mauritius, with even greater contact with India and the presence of Indians working within the Mauritian economy. Perhaps the presence of other whites, who become less connected to colonial whiteness in Mauritius, also deflects some of the loaded meaning of being

white there. And it is, undoubtedly, more common to see Mauritian Indians linked to other groups in different ways. But the enduring nature of the categories that French and British colonialism used in administering this colony becomes apparent in the ways in which people understand their interactions with others in this postcolonial nation, even as it is “being hailed as a superb example of successful mediations of the uncertain relationship between nationhood and ethnic or cultural identity” (Lionnet “Créolité in the Indian Ocean” 106). The relationship between Mauritian Indianness and Mauritian-ness is a fascinating one that I encountered as an Indian visiting Mauritius. It is recorded in very interesting ways in the public culture of this hybrid nation and is explored in some detail in this book.

Hybridity is a seductive idea, which, it is claimed by prominent theories in postcolonial studies, can lead us out of various constraints in conceiving agency. In its most politically articulated guises, hybridity is believed to reveal, or even provide, a politics of liberation for the subaltern constituencies in whose name postcolonial studies as a discipline emerged. In this book, I test these claims with reference to a set of theorists whose work forms the core informing the renewed interest in hybridity in contemporary theory. But I also conduct this investigation by way of a social frame of reference, which will be the overtly “hybrid” and “postcolonial” societies of the Indian Ocean Creole islands of Mauritius and La Réunion.

Mauritius and La Réunion, two small islands of the Indian Ocean, having known, among others, both British and French colonialism, quite easily speak to the theorists of the different theoretical derivatives of hybridity considered. These prominent theorists draw from both the generality of the postcolonial as well as, in some cases, the realities particular to a Creole specificity. Rather than setting up a relationship where society “answers” or even “questions” theory, my reading will privilege a range of texts of differing provenance from these islands. These texts are seen as “theorizing” in situ what I identify as the central question in theories on hybridity in recent postcolonial studies, namely that of agency.

At the same time, let me state early on that this book is not an exhaustive study “about” either or both of these islands. The complexity of focusing on a relatively unknown area of Francophone culture might bring certain expectations for the project, such as a copious introduction to the region, demonstration of where the creativity of particular writers fits into the postcolonial canon, and so forth. These might translate into a pressure, felt by the author, to anthologize compulsively in order to show that there is a vast range of texts that are not being referenced. It is a pressure that I resist actively. Instead, each of the texts selected from these islands will be treated as the

eloquent, fully developed creations I judge them to be and for which, precisely, they have been chosen. What I hope emerges also is the richness of the space that generated these texts and the significance of its particular engagement with hybridity and postcoloniality. Readers are referred to pertinent sources for more information on Indian Ocean literary creation, history, and context. What I propose here is a consequential point from which a dialogue can begin on the notion of hybridity as it has entered recent postcolonial studies. And I am persuaded that this dialogue necessarily brings about a restructuring of this notion, indicating a different derivative that I illustrate specifically in the reframing suggested in the culminating chapters. In these later chapters, I propose a different way of allying the thought of two thinkers of global hybridity, Edouard Glissant and Frantz Fanon, both of whom happen to be from the Caribbean Creole context and who have entered and occupied rather different spaces in postcolonial hybridity.

The hybrid is a colonial concept. This is not just to say that the term was coined during the period of high colonialism, but that it served certain interests, which were central to the colonial enterprise. Hybridity, then, is first and foremost a “racial” term. Hybrid individuals in the colonies testified to real encounters between the white colonizer and the native (most often slave) and subsequently required an active inscription in the laws and policies that managed and oversaw colonial activity. The superiority of the white race was, of course, a founding principle upon which colonialism was based—whether of the French style of so-called assimilatory policies or of what is often considered the more distant British form of rule in the colonies. The presence of hybrids directly called into question the clean division between these two groups and required the colonists to engage with this mixed section of the population with regard to inheritance, education, burials, marriage, and the notion of citizenship. In a comparable manner, postcolonial hybridity intervenes in the form of a theoretical argument against the homogenizing tendencies of global capitalism. It presents, one might say, the optimistic view of the effects of capitalism.

The prominence of the notion of hybridity in postcolonial studies should be reexamined with reference to two possible developments. Either the colonial context in which it was conceived is ever as pertinent to the postcolonial world, and therefore, the notion of hybridity retains its centrality in the ongoing, if modified, tensions between white people and people of color; or the radical changes that frame the interactions between these two groups (also recognizable as ex-colonizer and ex-colonized), and the changes within them have modified this notion of hybridity into something quite different from what it was during colonialism.

An examination of prominent theoretical versions of postcolonial hybridity will reveal that, more and more, the tendency in theory is to move away from the original entanglement of this idea with the notion of race. Instead questions of a hybrid culture, of hybridity in reading and in the very notion of identity are shown to exist. These instances of hybridity, it is proposed in these theories, should be recognized and promoted in a step that enables subaltern agency. That is, postcolonial theories of hybridity do away with the old dichotomy of colonizer/colonized, which is substituted by ideas of multiplicity, plurality, and difference in a less specifiable way. We will see that postcolonial texts of different kinds, which are closer to a "social ground," tend to take up and engage with this racial aspect much more explicitly as it is entangled with specific historical circumstances of racial categories and their changing significance associated with the history of that ground.

Postcolonial theories of hybridity can be seen to share some basic Marxian preoccupations and impulses, which are explored in the next chapter. Nevertheless, despite this and the fact that they all aim to privilege agency in the struggle against assimilation or homogenization, we will see that at the same time most of these recent theories work explicitly and implicitly against some concepts that are central to a Marxian account of agency. What then emerges, as I will show, is that an explosive theorist of struggle against colonization such as Frantz Fanon, when read within the framing of this version of postcolonial theoretical hybridity, has to be maneuvered into speaking a discourse that goes against the more basic ideas that inform his entire work. The critique of a "postcolonial Fanon" itself has been ongoing. Here, however, I take a new look at a part of Fanon's text of *Black Skin, White Masks*, which has been canonized within this prominent trend of hybridity in postcolonial criticism. I will argue that it is not that Fanon's dialectic of white and black fails to acknowledge and exploit hybridity fully by lapsing into universalism or humanism as Homi K. Bhabha has claimed, but rather, that the definition and preoccupations of this new derivative of hybridity are themselves at odds with what can be identified as hybridity in Fanon. Fanon's hybridity (particularly with reference to the notion of agency within it) has greater credibility even as a theoretical construct not just because it is anchored in a recognizable context but because it is tied to a politics of action of subaltern subjects. I will show that an idea of totality, which Fanon's work posits as essential for holding up agency, is lacking in the prominent version of hybridity in postcolonial studies. This notion is, however, found as a necessity within the fully ripened conception of thinkers whose intellectual processes and emotional impulses are conditioned by hybridity and an essentially Marxian informed vision of agency.

As in Fanon's case, I will argue that Edouard Glissant's conception of *Relation* explicates such a notion of totality while also activating many impulses central to Marxian thinking. Totality also emerges as a necessary condition for radical politics in the hybrid societies from the postcolonial world that are examined in this book. Derivatives of hybridity in postcolonial theories tend to obscure the conflictual aspect in hybridity, which remains of interest to a Marxian account of social change and is inscribed in societal processes in postcolonial locations. Hybridity as it can be identified in Fanon is tied to revolutionary social change, as we will see, while most postcolonial theories of hybridity, in their wish to be revolutionary, tend to overstate the ability of hybridity to dismantle power structures. Glissant's hybridity brings together reality and thought and challenges Marxian informed thinking to engage more consequentially with the idea of "difference." In this way, hybridity, as it can be gleaned from the thought of Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant—particularly through close reading and a Marxian framing offered in the chapters devoted to these two theorists—reconnects more credibly to the impulse for the formation of postcolonial studies as a discipline. The last two chapters provide a reading of each of these theorists in this particular way and are informed by the analyses of postcolonial Mauritius and La Réunion in the chapters preceding them.

Prominent theories of postcolonial hybridity recuperate the notion of agency while somehow eliding the very conditions within which hybridity as a concept emerged: the stunning inequality of two groups of people locked into a relationship of domination that is upheld and perpetuated by a system that operates in the sphere of the psychological and the symbolic as much as in the economic and the structural. My contention is that it is questionable to have recourse to such a disembodied notion of hybridity in an attempt to resolve conflicting situations where the inequalities of the colonial period continue to play out, even if modified or radically transformed through newer forces. The argument, then, is that if the overarching totality of colonialism, which gave hybridity its meaning and necessity has not been dismantled but rather reinvented, using hybridity to dismantle today's inequalities is a questionable gesture unless it is sufficiently retooled and reinvented itself particularly with regard to a new conception of totality in which struggle can be inscribed. If inequalities are no longer so clearly identifiable between this and that group, the area in which the hybrid is produced is still to be properly accounted for in these new theories. Françoise Vergès, whose work on *métissage* in La Réunion is a historically attentive one, has dry criticism for the proliferation of overly positive and exuberant notions of the hybrid, where an ideal has more currency than reality: "The idea of humanity is more appeal-

ing than the actual 'disappointing' human beings. I prefer 'disappointing human beings and their demystifying acts' ("Post-Scriptum" 357). In the new theories of hybridity it becomes hard to accommodate the stark realities of specific subaltern populations of the world and their versions of hybridity. My critique of new theories of hybridity targets the way in which agency is privileged in them without accounting for totality and contradiction. This critique is implicit in the following analyses that focus on the contours and details of hybridity as a social phenomenon as well as a complex political strategy in Mauritius and La Réunion, and emerges more explicitly later when hybridity in Fanon and Glissant is examined.

Tracking the notion of hybridity in the plural, multiracial societies of Mauritius and La Réunion reveals from the outset that hybridity can only be understood through a proper historical understanding of its connection to colonial administration. Both the colonial and the postcolonial (here referring quite simply to two eras in chronology) versions of hybridity in these islands are dependent upon a particular totality within which hybridity as a concept has been sustained. In the earlier version, colonial culture is instantiated in every hybrid occurrence, while in postcolonial hybridity, it is the post-colony as nation or possible nation (within a system of global capitalism) that informs and even necessitates the claim to hybridity. The will to transcend the nation, to make transnational connections, is in no way precluded as it will become evident particularly in the study of Mauritian politics in chapter 4.

Taking stock of such a situation should not in any way be construed as a defeatist or pessimistic view that foretells doom. That has not been the driving affect of this work. Instead, it is inspired by the place in both Fanon and Glissant of utopia that is ever in the future and ever, necessarily, out of reach. But in resolutely striving toward it, there is no room for complacency, no room even for a lapse in energy. Garnering all the exuberance of contemporary post-colonial theories of hybridity, I suggest that the energies contained within the concept of hybridity and in every identifiable hybrid location be released through an approach that can only be satisfied if its own movement joins up explicitly with the agency of those who occupy these locations. To do so, as I argue in this book, is to render indispensable the concepts of contradiction and totality, the latter being creatively linked to utopia.



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## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION: HYBRIDITY IN CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

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## EXAMINING AGENCY

This book represents an attempt to align more closely the notion of hybridity in postcolonial studies with the exigencies that led to the founding of this academic discipline itself. Such exigencies arose from recognizing and studying situations of stark inequalities, which were held in place and legitimated by the various machinations of, or inherited from, colonialism. That is, in unpacking and examining hybridity today in some of its theoretical versions as well as specific societal configurations, this book attends to the ways in which such inequalities might inform current derivatives of hybridity.

Hybridity is an enticing idea in current postcolonial studies.<sup>1</sup> In its dominant form, it is claimed that it can provide a way out of binary thinking, allow the inscription of the agency of the subaltern, and even permit a restructuring and destabilizing of power. These assertions need to be tested and this is precisely what I propose to do in this book. This book evaluates central claims regarding agency in postcolonial theories of hybridity and investigates the avatars of hybridity to be found in the realities of the Indian Ocean “Creole” islands of La Réunion, which remains a French department, and Mauritius, independent from Britain since 1968.

In theoretical discourse, hybridity has spawned a variegated vocabulary, including terms such as diaspora, métissage, creolization, transculturation. Although skeptical about the validity of an exuberant type of hybridity that, it is claimed, poses an effective challenge to oppressive forces of the increasingly

globalized world, I am interested in exploring what, if any, beneficence hybridity holds for a radical conception of agency. The term “radical” means quite simply here that agency, in this conception, must be tied to social change in which some inequality or injustice is addressed. I therefore think it important to provisionally, but clearly, distinguish between hybridity as a theoretical concept and a political stance that we can argue, and hybridity as a social reality with historical specificity. The collusion of these two domains (of theory/politics and social reality) with regard to the hybrid will become significant to the analyses that follow. For me, the most productive theories of hybridity are those that effectively balance the task of inscribing a functional-instrumental version of the relation between culture and society with that of enabling the more utopian/collective image of society. Privileging what is hybrid in today’s world cannot, even parenthetically, leave out the moment of capitalism in which such a view is offered—a moment that invites and, indeed, celebrates the hybrid through heterogeneity, multiplicity, and difference. On this view, a critical stance toward capitalism introduces skepticism into the idea that agency of the subaltern is thriving. The critique of capitalism comes from recognizing the unequal access to enabling processes, positions, and different kinds of capital for larger portions of the world’s population.

#### POLITICS OF HYBRIDITY

I wish to suggest, at the outset, some simple reconsiderations to demonstrate the importance of a more careful attention to the varied vocabulary that is employed in referring to hybridity in contemporary theory. Throughout this book I will work between vocabularies generated in the relationship of Francophone studies to the more general field of (anglophone) postcolonial studies. Part of the reasoning for this is purely circumstantial in that my training has been in French and Francophone literature and culture and French theories of culture especially as they relate to postcolonial studies. Also, the rapid movement of French theory into postcolonial studies has occurred in various ways, not insignificantly and apart from the many translations, through more and more theorists who are conversant in these two idioms and who activate these channels.

It is my contention that there has been, in the proliferation of recent and disparate work on hybridity, a rather loose set of related terms that have not been problematized. It is no longer clear what is being suggested when referring to processes that are understood to be hybridizing. Some terms one frequently encounters are, for example: diaspora, *créolité*, creolization, intercultural interaction, transculturation, *métissage*, or syncretism. I am not undertaking the task