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### MIMICRY, AMBIVALENCE AND HYBRIDITY

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#### ABSTRACT

When Robinson Crusoe set foot on the island and declared it his own, a new page was inscribed in the history of colonialism. The shipwreck becomes a historical moment in his history. Defoe is able to create a textual plantation with the undaunted Robinson at its center, involved in a double (d) divine action of invention and original self-invention. The footprint, however, will unsettle his undisturbed tranquility, and fear enters the stage. Neither the bible nor his guns will bring him peace. Crusoe will undergo the painful experience of recurrent traumatic nightmares before the event. The silence is broken. The Other has already inhabited the Self prior to the uncanny encounter: anxiety invades the body and mind of the stranded hero. The "textual empire" is shaken by the unknown: "The island is full of noises." The captured absent / present utterances are therefore unbounded; authority is de-authorized (is it?), and writing hybridized.

#### INTRODUCTION

What is hybridization?

It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor.

When the terms "**mimicry**" and "**hybridity**" are invoked in literary criticism, or in classrooms looking at literature from Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean, as well as their respective diasporas, there is usually a footnote somewhere to two essays by Homi K. Bhabha, "**Of Mimicry and Man,**" and "**Signs Taken For Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817.**" But students who look at those essays, or glosses of those essays in books like Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, generally come away only more confused. Though his usage of a term like "hybridity" is quite original, Bhabha's terminology is closely derived from ideas and terminology from Freud and French thinkers like Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. I do respect the sophistication of Bhabha's thinking -- and the following is not meant to be an attack on his work -- but I do not think his essays were ever meant to be read as pedagogical reference points.

What I propose to do here is define these complex terms, mimicry and hybridity, in plain English, using references from specific cultural contexts, as well as the literature itself. The point is not to tie the ideas up nicely, the way one might for an Encyclopedia entry, for example. Rather, my hope is to provide a starting point for initiating conversations about these concepts

that might lead to a more productive discussion than Bhabha's essays have in my own experiences teaching this material.

### MIMICRY

Mimicry in colonial and postcolonial literature is most commonly seen when members of a colonized society (say, Indians or Africans) imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonizers (say, the British or the French). Under colonialism and in the context of immigration, mimicry is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behavior: one copies the person in power, because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. Presumably, while copying the master, one has to intentionally suppress one's own cultural identity, though in some cases immigrants and colonial subjects are left so confused by their cultural encounter with a dominant foreign culture that there may not be a clear preexisting identity to suppress.

Mimicry is often seen as something shameful, and a black or brown person engaging in mimicry is usually derided by other members of his or her group for doing so. (There are quite a number of colloquial insults that refer to mimicry, such as "coconut" – to describe a brown person who behaves like he's white, or "oreo," which is the same but usually applied to a black person. Applied in reverse, a term that is sometimes used is "wigger."<sup>1</sup> See more on "reverse mimicry") Though mimicry is a very important concept in thinking about the relationship between colonizing and colonized peoples, and many people have historically been derided as mimics or mimic-men, it is interesting that almost no one ever describes themselves as positively engaged in mimicry: it is always something that someone else is doing.

Mimicry is frequently invoked with reference to the "been-to," someone who has traveled to the west, and then returned "home," seemingly completely transformed. Frantz Fanon mocked the affected pretentiousness of Martinician "been-tos" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and the cultural confusion of the been-to Nyasha (and her family) in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is one of the central issues in that novel. The characters in *Nervous Conditions* who have not had the same experience of travel in the west find the desire of those who have returned to impose their English values, language, and religion on everyone else bewildering and offensive.

Mimicry, however, is not all bad. In his essay "**Of Mimicry and Man**," Bhabha described mimicry as sometimes unintentionally subversive. In Bhabha's way of thinking, which is derived from Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of J.L. Austin's idea of the "performative," mimicry is a kind of performance that exposes the artificiality of all symbolic expressions of power. In other words, if an Indian, desiring to mimic the English, becomes obsessed with some particular codes associated with Englishness, such as the British colonial obsession with the sola topee, his performance of those codes might show how hollow the codes really are. While that may well be plausible, in fact, in colonial and postcolonial literature this particular dynamic is not seen very often, in large part, one suspects, because it is quite unlikely that a person would consciously employ this method of subversion when there are often many

more direct methods. Indeed, it is hard to think of even a single example in postcolonial literature where this very particular kind of subversion is in effect.

There is another, much more straightforward way in which mimicry can actually be subversive or empowering -- when it involves the copying of "western" concepts of justice, freedom, and the rule of law. One sees an example of this in Forster's *A Passage to India*, with a relatively minor character named Mr. Amritrao, a lawyer from Calcutta, whom the British Anglo-Indians dread. They dread him not because he is unfair; indeed, what is threatening about him is precisely the fact that he has learned enough of the principles of British law to realize that those principles should, in all fairness apply to Indians as much as to the British. As a foreign-educated, English speaking Indian lawyer in colonial India, he might be mocked as a "mimic man" or a "babu," but it may be that that mockery covers over a defensive fear that the British legal system is not quite as fair as it should be.

Indeed, the example of Amritrao in Forster's novel might lead to a broader political discussion: many anti-colonial nationalist movements in Asia and Africa emerged out of what might be thought of as mimicry of western political ideas. The historian Partha Chatterjee argued that Indian nationalism emerged as a "a derivative discourse" -- a copy of western nationalism adapted to the Indian context. Over time, of course, the derivative ideas of justice, democracy, and equality, as they were used by activists, tended to get adapted to a local culture. Perhaps the person who did this best was Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi took symbols of Indian asceticism and simplicity (such as traditional Indian dress and fabric) along with progressive western concepts of socialism, and used that new fusion of ideas to mobilize the masses of ordinary Indians, most of whom had had little direct contact with the British. Through Gandhi, Indian nationalism, which may have started as a "derivative" of nationalism in the west, became something distinctively and uniquely Indian.

As a final note before moving on to hybridity, it might be worthwhile to say a little about reverse mimicry, which in the colonial context was often referred to as "going native." Though mimicry is almost always used in postcolonial studies with reference to colonials and immigrant minorities imitating white cultural and linguistic norms (let's call this "passing up"), mimicry could also be reversed, especially since there are so many examples, in the history of British colonialism especially, of British subjects who either disguised themselves as Indians or Africans, or fantasized of doing so. The most famous example of this kind of reverse mimicry ("passing down") might be Richard Francis Burton, who often attempted to disguise himself as Arab or Indian during his time as a colonial administrator. In literature, the most influential example of affirmatively "passing down" might be Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, where Kipling invents a white child (the son of an Irish soldier in British India), who grows up wild, as it were, on the streets of Lahore, outside of the reach of British society. Though Kipling's interest in "passing down" does not overcome the numerous mean-spirited and racist statements Kipling made about Indians throughout his career, the thought of being able to break out of his

identity as an Anglo-Indian and live “like a native” does seemingly reflect a real affection and a sense of excitement about Indian culture.

**Ambivalence** is a state of having simultaneous, conflicting feelings toward a person or thing.<sup>2</sup> Stated another way, ambivalence is the experience of having thoughts and/or emotions of both positive and negative valence<sup>3</sup> toward someone or something. A Common example of ambivalence is the feeling of both love and hate for a person. The term also refers to situations where "mixed feelings" of a more general sort are experienced, or where a person experiences uncertainty or indecisiveness concerning something. The expressions "cold feet"<sup>4</sup> and "sitting on the fence"<sup>5</sup> are often used to describe the feeling of ambivalence.

Ambivalence is experienced as psychologically unpleasant when the positive and negative aspects of a subject are both present in a person's mind at the same time. This state can lead to avoidance or procrastination, or to deliberate attempts to resolve the ambivalence. When the situation does not require a decision to be made, people experience less discomfort even when feeling ambivalent.<sup>6</sup>

**Hybridity** refers in its most basic sense to mixture. The term originates from biology and was subsequently employed in linguistics and in racial theory in the nineteenth century. Its contemporary uses are scattered across numerous academic disciplines and is salient in **popular culture**.<sup>7</sup> This article explains the history of hybridity and its major theoretical discussion amongst the discourses of race, post-colonialism, Identity (social science), anti-racism & multiculturalism, and globalization. This article illustrates the development of hybridity rhetoric from biological to cultural discussions.

By contrast to mimicry, which is a relatively fixed and limited idea, postcolonial hybridity can be quite slippery and broad. At a basic level, hybridity refers to any mixing of east and western culture. Within colonial and postcolonial literature, it most commonly refers to colonial subjects from Asia or Africa who have found a balance between eastern and western cultural attributes. However, in Homi Bhabha's initial usage of the term in his essay “Signs Taken For Wonders,” he clearly thought of hybridity as a subversive tool whereby colonized people might challenge various forms of oppression (Bhabha's example is of the British missionaries' imposition of the Bible in rural India in the 19th century.).

However, the term hybridity, which relies on a metaphor from biology, is commonly used in much broader ways, to refer to any kind of cultural mixing or mingling between East and West. As it is commonly used, this more general sense of hybridity has many limitations. Hybridity defined as cultural mixing in general does not help us explicitly account for the many different paths by which someone can come to embody a mix of eastern and western attributes, nor does it differentiate between people who have consciously striven to achieve a mixed or balanced identity and those who accidentally reflect it. Hybridity defined this way also seems like a rather awkward term to describe people who are racially mixed, such as “Eurasians” in the British Raj in India, or biracial or multiracial people all around the postcolonial world. Fourth, though it is

more commonly deployed in the context of Indian or African societies that take on influences from the west, one needs to account for how hybridity, like mimicry, can run in “reverse,” that is to say, it can describe how western cultures can be inflected by Asian or African elements (“chutneyfied,” as it were). Finally, it seems important to note that there can be very different registers of hybridity, from slight mixing to very aggressive instances of culture-clash.

### **Hybridity as racial mixing:**

Hybridity originates from the Latin *hybrida*, a term used to classify the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar. A hybrid is something that is mixed, and hybridity is simply mixture. As an explicative term, hybridity became a useful tool in forming a fearful discourse of racial mixing that arose toward the end of the 18th Century. Scientific models of anatomy and craniometry were used to argue that Africans, Asians, Native Americans and Pacific Islanders were racially inferior to Europeans. The fear of miscegenation<sup>8</sup> that followed responds to the concern that the offspring of racial interbreeding would result in the dilution of the European race. Hybrids were seen as an aberration, worse than the inferior races, a weak and diseased mutation. Hybridity as a concern for racial purity responds clearly to the zeitgeist of colonialism where, despite the backdrop of the humanitarian age of enlightenment, social hierarchy was beyond contention as was the position of Europeans at its summit. The social transformations that followed the ending of colonial mandates, rising immigration, and economic liberalisation profoundly altered the use and understanding of the term hybridity<sup>9</sup>.

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