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Harmony and Discord
EVOCATIONS OF HYBRIDITY IN THEORY, CULTURE,
AND AUSTRALIAN MAGICAL REALISM

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In many arguments both for and against hybridity, the term emerges as a synonym for the “fusion” or “synthesis” of unlike or incommensurable cultural elements. In this paper I offer a different conception of hybridity—beyond the harmony of fusion. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, intentional novelistic hybridity functions as “an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another.” It is through intentional hybridity that the power, the “hieratic language” of authoritative discourses may be contested and undermined. Reading Sam Watson’s novel The Kadaitcha Sung (1990) and Merinda Bobis’ short story “An Earnest Parable” (1999) as examples of Bakhtinian “intentional” or “conscious” hybridity, I suggest some ways in which the magical realist strategies of these texts work in conjunction with their revisionist politics. In particular, I am interested in exploring certain questions of difference and identity that resonate throughout these narrative representations of the processes and effects of cultural hybridity. In foregrounding the (often uneasy) dialogue between differing cultural identities and histories, these hybrid texts unsettle the monologic discourses of white Australian historiography and narratives of nation. With its characteristically deconstructive approach to notions of empirical reality, singular versions of history, and “truth”, magical realism is an ideal mode for narratives of revision—writing that interrogates normative ideologies and assumptions, and illuminates that which is repressed or elided by authoritative discursive formations of nation and identity in Australia.
The current popularity of hybridity theories has sparked a number of interesting debates in the fields of post-colonial and cultural studies. It is a fiercely contested concept in discourses of identity, globalisation, diaspora and culture, and its conceptual and ideological malleability gives the term an aura of perpetual ambivalence; a slipperiness of signification that leads to a number of paradoxes and contradictions. Pnina Werbner articulates one paradoxical aspect of the debate when she notes that hybridity “is celebrated as powerfully interruptive and yet theorized as commonplace and pervasive.”5 Another contradictory aspect is that despite hybridity’s anti-essentialist connotations, the concept is always positioned somewhere between equivalence and opposition, and so would appear to depend for its articulation on the very notions of fixity that it claims to unsettle. The invocation of hybridity as a means of articulating states of in-betweenness in discourses of identity and culture risks constructing the constitutive elements of that hybrid as discrete, bounded entities that would remain locked in an oppositional struggle were it not for the syncretic power of hybridity. In addition to these semantic dilemmas, current discussions of hybridity also encourage questions about the usefulness of this concept for anti-essentialist and anti-racist cultural critique. If hybridity is taken as yet another theoretical term to denote cultural syncretism or the fusion of incommensurable elements, what potential does it have for revisionist or transgressive politics? Does hybridity have mutually transformative effects on the different cultures, texts, and identities it comprises, and what are the problems and possibilities of such effects? Is hybridity merely a descriptive term applied to existing conditions of contemporary cultural formations, or should it be seen, as Werbner argues, as “processual”;6 a hermeneutic mode for addressing intercultural negotiations and confrontations?

THE POLITICS OF HYBRIDITY

On one side of the hybridity debate are theorists and critics such as Jen Ang, Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, who argue for the importance of hybridity in transcending hierarchical power relations based on essentialist constructions of identity, and on the other side are those, like Floya Anthias and Aijaz Ahmad, for whom the notion of hybridity threatens to divert attention away from the lived realities of social injustices and inequalities. A suspiciously celebratory use of the concept of hybridity may indeed be seen deliberately to elide hegemonic practices and effects. In a recent essay Anthias writes that “hybridity is tied to the notion of cultural syncretism”,7 and that the debate on cultural hybridity “privileges the domain of the cultural as opposed to the material or the political […] and therefore depoliticizes culture. It loses sight of cultural domination; power, as embodied in culture, disappears.”8 While it is important to acknowledge the dangers of elision and obfuscation that accompany uncritical deployments of what Jacqueline Lo refers to as “happy hybridity”,9 there are other ways of thinking hybridity that do not conflate the term with notions of fusion or syncretism. As Ang argues, hybridity “has interrogative effects, it is a sign of challenge and altercation, not congenial amalgamation or merger.”10 Furthermore, I would argue that far from “depoliticising” culture, the debate on cultural
hybridity signifies a realignment of "culture and consciousness" with the problems of "social inequality and exclusion", by locating those specific instances in which hybridity emerges as an uncanny, disruptive force within a given set of cultural power relations. In the context of Australian cultural studies for example, the concept of hybridity has been extensively developed and debated in the field of Asian-Australian cultural criticism. In analysing and representing—autobiographically, critically, and creatively—the lived experience of hybrid cultural identities in Australia, these discourses serve to re-locate the concept of hybridity, from the abstraction of critical theory to a more grounded politics of cultural critique and intervention.

Nikos Papastergiadis voices a common concern about the uses of hybridity in cultural theory when he asks: "can we now have the confidence that hybridity has been moved out from the loaded discourse of 'race' and situated within a more neutral zone of identity?" The concept of hybridity is haunted by a history in which the term "hybrid" was used to describe children of "mixed-race" parentage in nineteenth century racist ethnography. This genealogy indicates the need for a critical evaluation of hybridity, since the term remains embedded, as Lola Young writes, "in a racialized scientific discourse which served as a support for claims to white racial superiority". The re-emergence of the term hybridity in late twentieth century postcolonial and cultural studies discourses has effected a partial shifting of hybridity "out of the loaded discourse[s] of race", and into those of identity, and more particularly, into discourses of culture and cross-cultural relations. The traces of hybridity's racial and biological meanings echo in current discourses of cultural hybridity in the form of assumptions of the purity or fixity of those elements of identity that come together in hybrid constructions. But, as Papastergiadis argues, hybridity "is not confined to a cataloguing of difference", nor is it necessary to attempt to resolve the problem of hybridity by a Hegelian dialectic of opposition and synthesis. It is perhaps more productive to see hybridity as a dialogic encounter between cultural entities that, prior to that encounter, existed separately (not in isolation, but removed from dialogue with the other entities within the hybrid construction). Hybridity, if I may hazard a definition, may be seen as a synergistic (rather than syncretic) relationship of unlike entities that is characterised by fluidity rather than fixity, and by ambivalence rather than opposition. While theories of hybridity, and critiques of hybrid representations, are limited in the kinds of interrogations of authority they can hope to achieve, there is, I think, a strong case to be made for the quietly subversive power of such hybrid interventions. As Bhabha points out in an early essay on hybridity, "resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention." Resistance may also come from the third space of hybridity, where, as Ang writes, "cultural change can be brought about quietly, without revolutionary zeal, by 'contaminating' established narratives and dominant points of view." This paper is a contribution to the arguments made by a growing number of critics who see hybridity as a liberating force in contemporary cultural studies—as a means of foregrounding conflict, diversity and dialogue rather than the harmonious assimilation of differences—and as a way of thinking beyond the dialectics of oppositional dualities.
change in ethnic or migrant groups and in nation-states." The threat to "an implicit social order" posed by the contestatory forces of intentional hybridity within a given society may be highlighted, according to Webner, by contrasting these conscious aesthetic hybrids with "the routine cultural borrowings and appropriations [...] which unconsciously create the grounds for future social change." Bakhin’s doubled conception of hybridity is also useful for enabling a theory of cultures that is directed toward specificities; one that demands that certain questions be addressed regarding the unlike cultural elements that are consciously hybridised. What, for instance, are the processes that differentiate and separate these unlike elements, and who benefits from such acts of demarcation? What particular effects are produced by juxtaposing unlike elements dialogically, and more importantly, how might these effects be seen as a contribution to a politics of resistance and intervention in Australia?

MAGICAL REALISM IN AUSTRALIAN FICTION

In the discussion that follows I refer to two contemporary Australian literary texts that, in addition to a number of other narrative strategies and conventions, use a magical realist mode. Magical realism is the hybrid literary mode par excellence. It brings together elements from realism and the fantastic, myth and history, and writes across the boundaries that demarcate the stylistic, cultural, linguistic, and ideological fields from which it borrows. By actively and intentionally dismantling borders and boundaries, magical realism demonstrates the arbitrary nature of their construction, and illuminates inequalities in the power structures that constitute the desire for borders and boundaries. The texts I discuss here operate as doubled hybrid constructions; the mixed genre or hybrid form of magical realism is an ideal framing device for representing the various processes by which differing cultures, histories, and individuals enter into, and engage with, the effects of hybridisation. Although Peter Carey’s *Illywhacker* (1985) is often included in international lists of magical realist novels, Australian examples of magical realism have generally received very little critical attention, or rather; critical attention has not been drawn to the magical realist stylistic conventions within these novels. Indeed, the term “magical realism” is often used disparagingly in current Australian literary criticism, as in Suvenrini Perera’s declaration that Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* (1997) is “no disembodied, ahistorical foray into magical realism.” Mudrooroo would probably disagree with Perera’s assessment of magical realism, as he argues that for Aboriginal writers the mode may be used to “deconstruct the awful invader history of Australia”, and to “intervene politically and socially into the dominant ideology.” Far from being “ahistorical”, magical realist fictions are frequently concerned with historical representations, and magical realist narrative strategies are often used to revise dominant versions of history.

Magical realism is no longer a fashionable critical concept, but this has not stopped writers from using the narrative techniques of magical realism, and it is my intention to reapproach this contemporary mode of writing through the concept of hybridity, and in the process, to redirect attention to the specific,
contextual politics of representation in these non-realist and anti-nationalist texts. A critique of magical realist fiction is a useful proving ground for hybridity theories, since magical realism itself provokes many of the same questions and contradictions that trouble the theoretical deployment of metaphors of "in-betweenness". The term magical realism, for instance, is often defined, following Stephen Selenon, as "an oxymoron ... a battle between two oppositional systems." Tamas Benyei's criticism of this kind of definition is succinct, and illuminating: "the unacknowledged premise of the oxymoronic reading is a simple semantic manoeuvre: the extension of the meaning of "realism" to the point where it becomes a synecdoche for 'European', 'modern', and 'rational'." Existing critical approaches to magical realism are inadequate because they fail to move beyond the politics of polarity encapsulated in the oxymoronic reading of the term, and because such approaches reduce the complexities of the magical realist text until it becomes simply a hybrid of realism and its "Other", which is characterised stylistically as the fantastic, or ontologically as the supernatural. Rawdon Wilson seems at first to go beyond dualistic critical approaches when he notes the "faculty for boundary-skipping between worlds" required of readers of magical realist novels, but he ends up trapped by the logic of oppositional dualities: "in magical realism space is hybrid (opposite and conflicting properties co-exist)." The relationship between the real and the un-real in magical realist narratives is not one of opposition, but of ambivalence, and such novels typically foreground the dialogue between different conceptions of reality and non-reality to make this point.

MAGICAL REALISM AND MULTICULTURAL MIXING: MERLINDA BOBIS' "AN EARNEST PARABLE"

Bobis' short story may be read as an example of Bakhtinian intentional hybridity in its use of magical realist narrative techniques, and in the deliberate, conscious juxtaposition of different "linguistic consciousnesses", represented through language and characterisation. At the same time, the story itself illustrates Bakhtin's concept of unconscious, organic hybridity, in its representation of the everyday encounters and interactions of languages and cultures within a social community. This is a tale about a communal tongue. In typical magical realist fashion, this metaphor is literalised in the narrative so that the residents of Bessel Street, in an unnamed Australian suburb, quite literally share one tongue between them: "The pink flesh toured up and down the street, went into homes, into mouths of different origins. There was the baker from Turkey, the Filipino cook, the Australian couple with the fish shop, the Italian butcher and the Sri Lankan tailor" (2). The grotesque imagery of people taking the tongue out of their mouths and passing it on is described in intimate detail, and in the matter-of-fact tone of narration characteristic of magical realism: "Bessel Street's most precious possession. Last week, it lodged with the Italian butcher who earlier had picked it up from the Australian couple. The butcher was not one to waste time. Immediately he laid this soft, pink flesh, moist with the previous owner's steak and peppercorns, inside his mouth" (1). The juxtaposition of the description of ordinary, everyday details—in this case, the sensory details of taste and touch—
with the extraordinary event of a removable tongue is another magical realist 
convention, which serves to rupture the fabric of the real, and to unsettle 
normative expectations about mimetic cause and effect. Such techniques create a 
conceptual fissure through which other normative assumptions and ideologies 
may be questioned. The narrative economy of the literalized metaphor enables a 
condensed signification of that metaphor, and at the same time provides it with 
an extended expressive potential.

Throughout the story, a gradual hybridization of language takes place. The 
differing cultural origins of each resident are represented through the tropes of 
food and language, and the sharing of one tongue leads to a hybridisation of 
speech and of culinary tastes:

On their respective days of owning the tongue, each of the neighbours could not 
help but echo the mouth of the previous owner. The Italian family eventually 
developed a taste for the occasional cardamom tea, the Filipino adventurously 
spread some vegemite on his pan de sal, and, at one time, the Australian couple 
pered fish heads into their sour soup. (3)

Because speech is impossible without a tongue, the different residents learn to 
listen carefully during their times of silence and to take pleasure in the words of 
others. The tongue retains traces of the languages of each owner, creating a 
process of linguistic creolisation that recalls Bakhtin’s notion of unconscious 
hybrity: “Last week for instance, the word “bella” found its way into a Turkish 
ditty whose refrain would later inspire the new name of the Australian fish shop, 
which supplied the mussels for the butcher’s marinara that sneaked into the 
Filipino chef’s kitchen […]” (3). While the pleasures of linguistic and culinary 
hybrity might suggest an allegorical celebration of the quotidian acts of 
negotiation and exchange between people of different cultural backgrounds— 
relations that make up what Ghassan Hage has called the “multicultural Real”41—
the tale ends on a cautionary note, and leaves a bitter aftertaste:

You see the tongue had an excellent memory. It was never known to forget 
anything, least of all the fact that it was once the soft, pink flesh of a South 
Coast mollusc … The pides and gulab jamuns, the daily bonjours and even the 
highly spiced curries and love serenades could never drown the unmistakable 
tang of Australian surf and gnt—and, truly like surf, after this home truth was 
dramatised on TV’s latest cooking show, the heart of one viewing nation swelled 
and swelled with pride. (3)

The consumption of “ethnic cultures” promoted by the discourse of “official 
multiculturalism”42 rests on a denial of cross-cultural hybridisation (beyond such 
non-threatening notions as “fusion-cuisine”), and this anti-hybrid perspective 
contributes to the containment of non-white identities by processes of cultural 
essentialism and reification, and by the naturalisation of the dominant culture— 
here parodied in the use of stereotypical images of landscape. In the story’s 
conclusion, the tongue retains an “authentically Australian” character despite its 
hybridising encounters with the foods and languages of other countries. As I read
it, Bobis' parable speaks of the potential for cross-cultural understanding, but also
speaks a warning about what is concealed by the ideologies of "tolerance" and
inclusiveness promoted by the discourse of multiculturalism in Australia.

ON "COMPLICATED ENTANGLEMENT" AND THE ANXIETIES
OF CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* is a complex and multi-layered novel, and I do
not intend to give a detailed reading of it here, but instead discuss briefly the
treatment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in the novel through the
concept of hybridity. Mudrooroo has described Watson's novel as "Maban
Reality", a mode that uses "traditional storytelling content and structures", and
which is "akin to magic realism". There is a danger here that the use of the term
"Maban Reality" to describe the magic or supernatural elements of the novel
might be seen as a claim for an authentic, essentialised Aboriginal reality in
opposition to what Mudrooroo calls "natural scientific reality", a dichotomy that
repeats the definitional problematic of magical realist literary criticism outlined
above. Suzanne Baker approaches the novel in similar terms: "A conventional
western world-view is carefully detailed while at the same time the narrator
introduces another level of reality, that of suspicion and myth, which is
inexplicable according to the logic and reason of Western thought." For critics
in the west, the supernatural or magical elements in magical realism present a
unique epistemological dilemma. Unable to incorporate the supernatural into
their own frame of reference, many critics attempt a definition based on
assumptions about the "folkloric" or "mythical" nature of the supernatural
occurrences—and this kind of definition leads inevitably to the creation of any
number of Manichean dualities—culture/nature, rational/irrational,
technology/superstition. From this point it becomes all too easy to position non-
western cultures in the murky shadow-lands of these hierarchical binaries, and to
reserve reason and rationality for those "enlightened" cultures of capitalist post-
modernity. In speculating about "non-Western" cultural systems, even going so far
as to write that magical realist narrative "appears to the late-twentieth-century
adult readers ... as fresh, childlike, even primitivism", critics of magical realism
have framed the genre within an orientalist hermeneutics comprised of cultural
essentialism and binary oppositional critique.

While I maintain that such readings are (at best) not productive, the novel does
employ many magical realist narrative strategies that should be noted, some of
which are: the juxtaposition of supernatural characters and events with social
realist depictions of everyday life in contemporary Brisbane; a tendency towards
excess, particularly in the representation of sexual acts; and a condensed time
frame that places historical events and characters on the same diegetic level as
those represented in its contemporary setting. This last point is a crucial strategy
within the novel, as it allows Watson to draw explicit comparisons between white
violence in the past, specifically in the genocide that "cleared" the land for white
settlement, and the contemporary violence of Aboriginal deaths in custody, police
brutality and racism. Gareth Griffiths suggests that this aspect of the novel

ibid., p. 630.


Floya Anthias, op.cit., p. 638.


Papastergiadis, op.cit., p. 258.


Ien Ang, op.cit., p. 2.


Mikhail Bakhtin, op.cit., p. 276.

ibid., p. 343.

ibid., p. 368.

loc.ct.

I borrow Lynne Pearce's term 'polychronotopy' here to denote the general narrative structure of magical realism—in which several different chronotopes are juxtaposed in a hybrid construction. See Lynne Pearce, Reading Dialogics. New York: Routledge, 1994: p. 18.


Robert Young, op.cit., p. 22.

Young, op.cit., p. 21.

Mikhail Bakhtin, op.cit., p. 360.

loc.ct.

Werbner, op.cit., p. 5.


36 ibid., 4.


40 Mikhail Bakhtin, op.cit., p. 358.


43 Mudrooroo, op.cit., p. 4.

44 Suzanne Baker, op.cit., p. 86.


49 loc.cit.,


53 ibid., 280.


55 ibid., p. 211.