

# Hybridity and Creativity

Ian M Clothier

**Everyone from Helen Clark down in this land, seems pleased to present Aotearoa New Zealand as a multicultural society. Often though, when multiculturalism is discussed an embedded assumption seems to lurk: the notion that in a multicultural society there is a kind of ‘forest of cultures’. Over there is an Indian, to the right someone from Tonga, and standing next to the German is someone from Nigeria. It is unnecessary to point any accusatory fingers regarding this assumption, but important simply to state that this vision is incomplete: in-between the trees of the forest of cultures, are the hybrid bushes of cultural pluralism.**

## Hybridity

In a broad brush view, culture has two primary operative functions: one is to endorse what Homi Bhabha called the ‘fixed tablet of tradition’ and the second is to provide a location for the progression of culture through generations and time. These two forces intermingle in our daily lives. The fixed tablet of tradition is referred to when questions of correct dress, action, song or processes arise. However nearly any parent or grandparent will tell you things have changed from a cultural point of view. The latter refers to the process of cultural change and hybridisation – one way to distinguish between these two cultural forces is that fixed tradition is not geographically dependent (think of the many festivals that occur both in the originating homeland and where sufficient migrants have settled), whereas as hybridisation is often specifically related to place, locale and situation.

Cultural hybridity has not always been viewed positively. Indeed, the Latin root of hybrid is *hibrida* which means ‘the bastard child of a Roman and a slave’. Hybrids have traditionally been despised, hidden from view and excluded from power. This is true of nearly all cultures up until the middle of the

twentieth century. Racial intermingling was frowned upon, which is strange in retrospect because where ever two cultures have been situated adjacent to each other, intermingling occurred.

Hybrid cultures are not the simple intermingling of two parent cultures, in the way red and blue make purple. Instead, a so-called ‘third space’ of hybridity arises, which gives rise to aspects that are unique to the hybrid. For example, in the Pitcairn-Norfolk culture from which I am maternally descendent, the language is a composite of old English and Tahitian, plus words that are independent – these words have arisen from a sense of place. *Nawi* means to swim on Pitcairn and Norfolk Island, and to dive on Tahiti. *Yorlye* meaning ‘you all’ is clearly a compression of the English. Some names for fish – pick-pick, dotter or whistlin, appear to be neologisms. In a hybrid culture, red and blue make red, blue, purple and yellow.

This third space of hybridity is uniquely authentic. Cultural hybridity has a critique for notions of cultural authenticity, which is often thought to be the sole preserve of cultures endorsing the fixed tablet of tradition. As the organisers of the architectural conference *European 6* wrote: “On the

basis of a study carried out into the development of Mexican culture it is stated that this culture, as a melting together of different 'authentic' cultures, is a typical example of a hybrid culture – but that at the same time it is highly authentic. Authenticity and hybridity are not opposites but are natural extensions of each other. Hybridity produces new forms of authenticity and is inherent in processes of social and cultural dynamics in which various cultures confront each other.”<sup>9</sup>

That said, because hybrids are melds of cultures, drawing influences from 'parent' cultures and generating third space conditions, the visibility of hybrids is less obvious. For example, in regard to Pitcairn-Norfolk, this highly authentic culture does not have a national anthem, has two flags and no national dress. These are precisely some of the foundations the fixed tablet of tradition rests upon. So it is perhaps interesting to observe that while most cultures define themselves by these cultural referents, that these referents are not necessary to culture and tradition. Pitcairn-Norfolk has a strong sense of culture and tradition.

A second sharp contrast between cultures in the fixed tablet of tradition and hybrids is the notion of choice in cultural referent. For example, if a local school is having an 'ethnic day' those referring to the fixed tablet simply reference standing authority on the most appropriate dress. In contrast the hybrid must make a choice. This choice is significant because in cultural hybrids, traditions are loosened, and the capacity to make choices allowed. Cultural hybridity therefore, represents a zone of cultural dynamism. This ferment of culture is found on the borders, in the overlaps, and the in-between places between two or more cultures.

Indeed, while fixed cultures and hybrids have been separated for contrast for most of this article, in contemporary society the two go hand in hand, with the processes of hybridisation generating fresh states of cultures in the fixed tradition. To illustrate this point I need only refer to the Japanese child who dances in a troupe of Irish dancers in New Plymouth, or the combination of Scottish and Polynesian dancing presented one year at Style Pasifika – the two dance groups rehearsed in the

same hall and this provided fertile ground for interaction.

This point concerning an interrelationship between traditional and hybrid culture is of particular relevance to New Zealand Aotearoa. That is because in this multi-cultural forest it is more likely in the future that the hybrid bushes will overtake the forest, rather than the trees of the forest growing taller. There will be parents, grandparents and great grandparents that might lament this development, but it is inevitable.

Most youth today engage with international cultural forces particularly in regard to music, and pertinently New Zealand Aotearoa hip hop is unique. This is exactly a hybrid process – adoption of influence from elsewhere, that results in unique states subject to local forces and impact. When Malcolm McClaren visited New Zealand recently, he made the comment that contemporary young adult culture stands between two dynamics – authenticity and karaoke. As such young people here want to both participate in international culture and locate their cultural heritages. The cultural influence might be adapted or adopted, worn on the sleeve, and subject to change and mutation rather than expressed in ways determined by the fixed tablet. However the urge to locate heritage is strong and should be encouraged rather than imposed with fixed parameters. It is better to have people on the same side of the fence than running loose and disengaged from their heritage.

## Creativity

Notions around cultural hybridity have been occupying the minds and computers of writers and academics in relatively recent years. Bhabha's significant *The Location of Culture* was published in 1994. By 1997 Eduardo Manuel Duarte would comment that the 'leitmotif of multi-cultural discourse was hybridity'. Close on ten years later, creative art works that reference hybridity are beginning to appear not just at the borders of the art world, but now at some of the most important events for contemporary practice.

The zone of cultural dynamism surrounding sites of hybridity engender a powerful resource for creativity. Rather than following a distinguishing set of aspects in regard to content and media, creative

<sup>9</sup> See European 6: [www.european.nl/european6/euro6\\_alg\\_e.html](http://www.european.nl/european6/euro6_alg_e.html) (8 October 2002).

work that references cultural hybridity is spread across the horizon of contemporary practice. Approaches are as diverse as that of the virtual reality of Tamiko Thiel and the documentary ethic of Samina Mishra.

Thiel is a Japanese American who now has a third cultural affiliation – she lives in Germany with her husband. Complementing this diversity in ethnicity is a multi-disciplinary CV – Bachelor and Masters degrees from Stanford in Product and Mechanical Engineering and Diploma from the Fine Arts Academy in Munich. At the 2006 International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) the MIT Advanced Visual Studies Research Fellow exhibited a virtual reality art work where the cultural influences of Japan and America found complimentary expression. The horrible ghouls of Japanese imagination and the terrors of napalm in Vietnam mapped the ravages of hell, while parts of heaven were populated by multiple wiggled figures from 17th century Europe and Buddhist imagery. One interesting aspect of Thiel's work was the flawless assimilation of cultural diversity. There were no shocks or perceptible shifts, rather one complete space, perhaps referencing Thiel's complete identity as a hybrid.

Samina Mishra is a documentary film maker and media practitioner based in New Delhi. At ISEA 2004, Mishra exhibited a documentary as video, as printed digital images with text from interviews and authors notes, and as a website. Home and away explored the dynamics of hybrid identity among second and third generation children of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi parents. The comfortable division between the home left behind and a new home, “between a nostalgic past and pragmatic present”<sup>10</sup> as Mishra put it, was easily identifiable for the first generation of the Indian diaspora. For the subsequent generations however, the one known home was “a unique combination of London's physical space and the subcontinent's culture”.

These art works underline many of the comments made by writers and academics on the subject of cultural hybridity. The works have both exposed and critiqued assumptions about culture and identity.

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<sup>10</sup> See ISEA 2004 12th International Symposium on Electronic Art published by m-cult, Helsinki 2004.

Questioning an embedded assumption within some discussion of multiculturalism started this article, and further interrogating the discourse will end it. For as the (hybrid) cultural development discussion continues, it is relevant to point to further embedded assumptions.

The first of these is the grand scale assumption nearly untested in all the discussion that democracy is the sole presumed basis for the societal development of humanity. Democracy is so often twinned with commercialism that when Estonia released itself from Russian control in the 1990s, part of the discussion among the people involved the question: is the aim of democracy simply to be able to afford a newer BMW? Is financial success the goal of human endeavour? Clearly there are some among us who do not believe this should be the goal.

One thing I like to remind some Western commentators is that a place that lacks electricity, where entire families sleep in one room, where the trappings of Western society such as TV and DVD players are not present – such a space is not necessarily one of poverty. Across the Pacific spaces such as this can be seen many times and these are spaces of family strength and bonding, zones of cultural wealth.

The hybrid creative project, The District of Leistavia<sup>11</sup> raised these issues in an online voting questionnaire where the results of voting were used to generate the constitution of the micronation. The audience filling out the online form were basically an international audience that has a connection to the internet, who are also interested in electronic art projects. While the project was creative rather than scientific, as litmus of the international online audience the results of voting were very interesting.

For example, consider the responses to the question: ‘How is the Head of State decided?’ The collated answers of voting were Democracy 9%; Monarchy 2%; Meritocracy 59%; Nonarchy 30%. In other words, Meritocracy (defined as the political

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.art-themagazine.com/hybridia](http://www.art-themagazine.com/hybridia). The research that framed the writing of the constitution voting questions was influenced by cultural interconnections found between Estonia, Pitcairn and Norfolk, hence the hybrid basis of the project. I am principle creative director in this collaborative project.

structure where the person who serves the community best is Head of State) was overwhelmingly the choice of respondents. While such a political system is perhaps the dream of a creative, the important point is that there are options to democracy, and when there is an unrestrained selection procedure, that people do prefer a means of political system other than democracy.

The question which asked respondents to select the economic system was also revealing and generated surprising results. The collated responses were: Cash based on gold 5%; Barter 20%; Ecologically sustainable value 61%; Spiritual value 14%. Here sustainable value was the dominant selection, even when respondents were informed that this may mean increased prices. Once again, the assumption that capitalist democracy is the only way to go, has been tested and found wanting.

While all online, international, art interested persons are of course participating in the products of capitalist democracy (as they are using computers and the internet) this should not be taken to mean that reasonable, intelligent and interested persons throughout the globe agree that this political-economic system is the only option of any virtue.

And yet, try and find places where this subject is raised and these are few, outside of sites of radical opposition. Have we as intelligent thinkers come to the final solution to the structure of society? I think not, and likewise believe it is no coincidence that these questions might have arisen in a creative project that directly references cultural hybridity, for the hybrids are inviting us to consider the assumptions that guide discussions around culture, identity and society.

**Ilan M Clothier** is an artist/writer whose main creative themes are cultural hybridity and nonlinearity. He is a direct descendant maternally of the Tahitians and mutineers of the mutiny on HMS Bounty saga. He currently lives in New Plymouth, New Zealand, South Pacific Ocean, where he is Lecturer, Academic Discipline Leader Visual Arts and founding Director of the newly created Research Centre for Interdisciplinary Creativity at the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki.