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Together-in-Difference: Beyond Diaspora, Into Hybridity¹

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One of the most urgent predicaments of our time can be described in deceptively simple terms: how are we to live together in this new century—this century that has begun so sadly, so violently? “We” and “together” are the key sites of contestation here. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, the growing global prominence of what has come to be called identity politics has bred a profound suspicion of any universalising claims to “a common humanity”. In this climate, the very idea of living “together” becomes hugely daunting. What are the possibilities of a sense of togetherness that can transcend rampant division and fragmentation based on particularist identities, without returning to the old hegemony of an assimilationist, Eurocentric homegeneity? How, in short, can we live together-in-difference?

In this paper, I will argue for the importance of *hybridity* in a world in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between us and them, the different and the same, here and there, and indeed, between “Asian” and “Western”. In Clifford Geertz’s words, we now live in a globalised world in which there is “a gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences” (Geertz 1988,148). Hybridity is a necessary concept to hold onto in this condition, because unlike other key concepts in the contemporary politics of difference—such as diaspora and multiculturalism—it foregrounds complicated entanglement rather than identity, togetherness-in-difference rather than separateness and virtual apartheid. It is also, as I will argue, a concept that prevents the absorption of all difference into a hegemonic plane of sameness and homogeneity.

Claiming one’s *difference* and turning it into symbolic capital has become a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have been marginalised or excluded from the structures of white or Western hegemony. “Diaspora” has been an increasingly popular name for that symbolic capital in recent years. In light of global power relations, the significance of diasporic identity lies in its force as a symbolic declaration of liberation from the abject position of “ethnic minority” in “an oppressive national hegemony” (Clifford 1997, 255). As James Clifford has remarked, “diasporic identifications reach beyond ethnic status within the composite, liberal state”, imparting a “sense of being a ‘people’ with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation” (Clifford 1997, 255). It is undeniable that the idea of diaspora is an occasion for positive identification for many, providing a powerful sense of transnational belonging and connection with dispersed others of similar historical origins. The Chinese diaspora, for example, has by virtue of its sheer critical mass, global range and mythical might, evinced an enormous power to operate as a magnet for anyone who can somehow be identified as “Chinese”—no matter how remote the ancestral links. This reaching back to one’s ancestral “roots” can be a powerful, almost Utopian, emotional pull. But notwithstanding the obvious benefits to some, what are the *costs* of this recent valorisation of diaspora?

¹ Most of the material in this paper was published in a different form in my book *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge.

While the transnationalism of diasporas is often taken as an implicit point of critique of the territorial boundedness and internally homogenising perspective of the nation-state, the limits of diaspora lie precisely in its own assumed boundedness, its inevitable tendency to stress its internal coherence and unity, logically set apart from “others”. Diasporic formations transgress the boundaries of the nation-state on behalf of a globally dispersed “people”—for example, “the Chinese”—but paradoxically this transgression can only be achieved by drawing a boundary around the diaspora, “the Chinese people” themselves. It is therefore important, in my view, to recognise the double-edgedness of diasporic identity: it can be the site of both support and oppression, emancipation and confinement, solidarity and division.

Let me first pause at the increasing popularity of the term diaspora itself. While this term was once reserved as a descriptor for the historical dispersion of Jewish, Greek and Armenian peoples, today it tends to be used much more generically to refer to almost any group living outside its country of origin, be it Italians outside Italy, Africans in the Caribbean, North America or Western Europe, Cubans in Miami and Madrid, Koreans in Japan, or Chinese all over the world. Indeed, as Kachig Tololyan remarks, “the significant transformation of the last few decades is the move towards re-naming as diasporas ... communities of dispersion ... which were known by other names until the late 1960s: as exile groups, overseas communities, ethnic and racial minorities, and so forth” (Tololyan 1996, 3). To put it differently, the burgeoning language and consciousness of diaspora is itself a manifestation and effect of intensifying cultural globalisation. While migrations of people have taken place for centuries and have been a major force in the creation of the modern world of nation-states since the nineteenth century, it is only in the past few decades—with the increased possibilities of keeping in touch with the old homeland and with coethnics in other parts of the world through faster and cheaper jet transport, mass media and electronic telecommunications—that migrant groups have become collectively more inclined to see themselves not as minorities within nation-states, but as members of global diasporas that span national boundaries. For example, while “overseas Chinese” used to be the common English term to describe the dispersed migrant Chinese communities around the world that were usually referred to in local terms, in the past decade or so they have been increasingly frequently described collectively and unifyingly, in global terms, as “Chinese diaspora”.

It is clear then that the discourse of diaspora owes much of its contemporary currency to the economic, political and cultural erosion of the modern nationstate as a result of postmodern capitalist globalisation—what Tololyan calls “the transnational moment”. Tololyan even nominates diasporas as the paradigmatic Others of the nation-state: the increasing assertiveness of diasporic groups in representing and organising themselves *as* transnational communities forces nation-states to “confront the extent to which their boundaries are porous and their ostensible homogeneity a multicultural heterogeneity” (Tololyan 1991, 5). Seen in this way, diasporas not only are placed in direct opposition to the nation-state, but are also implicitly designated as key socio-cultural formations capable of *overcoming* the constrictions of national boundaries—the means through which people can imagine and align themselves *beyond* the nation. Much contemporary work on diaspora, both scholarly and popular, represents this transnational diasporic imaginary as a liberating force. Simply put, the nation-state is cast as the limiting, homogenising, assimilating power structure, which is now, finally, being deconstructed from within by those groups who used to be marginalised within its borders but are now bursting out of them through their diasporic transnational connections.

Of course, the transnationalisation of the communal imagination afforded by the notion of diaspora can be experienced as liberating indeed. For example, by identifying oneself as part of a globally significant, transnational Chinese diasporic community, a minority Chinese subject can rise—at least in the imagination—above the national environment in which (s)he lives but from which (s)he may always have felt socially and culturally excluded. I would contend that much of the current popularity of “Chinese diaspora” amongst ethnic Chinese around the world is fuelled precisely by this emotive desire not just to belong, but to belong to a respectable imagined community, one that instils pride in one’s identity precisely because it is so much larger and more encompassing, in geographical terms at least, than any territorially bounded nation. Global diaspora, in this context, signifies triumph over the shackles of the nation-state and national identity.

However, there is something deeply problematic about such celebrations of diaspora. A narrow focus on diaspora will not help but hinder a more truly transnational, cosmopolitan imagination of what it means to live in the world “as a single place”, to use Roland Robertson’s characterisation of the globalised world (1992). My theoretical starting point is that just like nations, diasporas are not natural entities but “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983). As such, I will conclude that the transnationalism of diaspora is actually proto-nationalist in its outlook, because no matter how global its reach, its imaginary orbit is demarcated ultimately by the closure effected by the category of the diasporic identity itself. In this sense, the politics of diaspora is exclusionary as much as it is inclusionary, just like that of the nation.

Let’s look then at the Chinese diaspora. In the economic realm, the rising power of what Ong and Nonini (1997) call “modern Chinese transnationalism”—whose subjects are jetsetting businessmen crisscrossing the Asia-Pacific to enhance their commercial empires—has received much attention. This transnational Chinese capitalist class, mythically held together by supposedly unique Chinese cultural characteristics such as *guanxi*, has grown substantially since the opening up of mainland China in the mid-1980s (see, for example, Chan 2000). The creation of new overseas Chinese business networks operating on a global scale has accelerated in the 1990s as traditional overseas Chinese voluntary associations, in the past organised mainly under principles of native place, kinship and dialect and dedicated to traditional obligations such as ancestor worship, have been transformed into modern, globally operating organisations specifically committed to expanding economic opportunities for overseas Chinese business people across national boundaries (Liu 1998).

But the strengthening of global Chinese identification goes far beyond the level of economic cooperation and trade connections: it is a transnational *cultural* movement involving many ethnic Chinese whose concerns are mainly of a personal- political nature, dealing with basic issues of identity and belonging. An example of this is one of the most well-known popular Chinese diaspora institutions in recent years, the website Huaren (<http://www.huaren.org>). The site’s main stated objective is “to promote kinship and understanding among all Overseas Chinese”—a task hugely facilitated by the quintessential technology of contemporary transnationalism: the Internet. The site’s homepage depicts the Chinese diasporic experience specifically in terms of loss of identity, and stresses the need and opportunity to restore it through the electronic assertion of a pro to familial, ethnic/racial community:

Chinese are estimated to be living in over 136 different countries, making it perhaps the most widespread ethnic group in the world. Such diversity is indeed awe-inspiring. Yet, it is the same diversity which creates gulfs among peoples. We often encounter Chinese-

Americans or Chinese-Canadians who know or care little of their counterparts elsewhere. Such ignorance and indifference should be corrected (<http://www.huaren.org>, About Us).

Put briefly, then, Huaren's activist desire is to unite the Chinese Diaspora (it is not insignificant that the word diaspora is generally capitalised in Huaren's editorial statements). It wishes to counter the fragmenting effects of centuries-long spatial scattering through a reaffirmation of historical continuity and the perpetuity of a proto-familial blood connection that crosses the geographical borders and dividing lines imposed by nation-states. Unlike the business networks, which can be said to have instrumental reasons to capitalise on co-ethnic identification (i.e., economic opportunity), for Huaren the affirmation of diasporic Chinese identity is an end in itself: in this sense, it practises pure identity politics on a global scale.

In his book *Global Diasporas* Robin Cohen notes that "a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co ethnicity with others of a similar background" (Cohen 1997, ix). It is precisely this acceptance of one's primordial Chineseness that Huaren wishes to strengthen or instil in anyone who has some Chinese ancestry. From this point of view, any Chinese American or Chinese Canadian would do well, to all intents and purposes, to be Chinese first, and American or Canadian only second, and so help bolster the internal cohesion and solidarity of the global Chinese diasporic community.

It is clear what is involved in such diaspora politics. First of all, it is based on the premise that ancestry is ultimately more important than present place of living in determining one's contemporary identity and sense of belonging. It is also premised on the notion that the signifier "Chinese" alone, whatever its meaning, is sufficient to differentiate between people who do and do not belong to this massive diasporic community, and to somehow seal the shared identity of all those who do belong. One perhaps unintended effect of this is the inevitable hardening of the boundary between "Chinese" and "non-Chinese". It is in this sense that the language of diaspora is fundamentally proto-nationalist: it feeds into a *transnational nationalism* based on the presumption of internal ethnic sameness and external ethnic distinctiveness. Unlike the nationalism of the nationstate, which premises itself on a national community which is territorially bound, diasporic nationalism produces an imagined community that is deterritorialised, but that is symbolically bounded nevertheless. Its borders are clearly denned, at least in the imagination, and its actual and potential membership is finite: only certain people, notionally "Chinese" people, can belong to the "Chinese diaspora".

It is this particularist vision inherent in the diasporic imagination that Benedict Anderson has scathingly criticised as lacking in "universal grounding". In his view, it "represents a certain contemporary vision of cosmopolitanism based on a quasi-planetary dispersion of bounded identities", attractive to some, Anderson suggests, because it makes them feel "entitled to belong to ancient bounded communities that nonetheless stretch impressively across the planet in the age of 'globalization'" (Anderson 1998, 131). According to Anderson, this vision distorts the way real social subjectivities are historically formed and transformed by global migrations, because it assigns particular people a priori to particular diasporic groupings: "Wherever the 'Chinese' happen to end up—Jamaica, Hungary, or South Africa—they remain countable Chinese, and it matters little if they also happen to be citizens of those nation-states" (Anderson 1998, 131). In short, the discourse of diaspora is authorised in principle by a fundamental notion of closure: it postulates the existence of closed and limited, mutually exclusive universes of ethnic sameness. Difference is absolutised.

One could object, of course, that this critique disparages the fact that many people with Chinese ancestry today voluntarily identify with their Chinese “roots”—a development in sync with the emergence of identity politics and the rise of multiculturalism, mostly in Western nation-states, especially the United States. Indeed, novels by Amy Tan and many other Chinese-American writers have popularised the stories of young and old second-, third- or even fourth generation Americans with Chinese ancestry who derive profound meaning and joy from the rediscovery of their Chinese heritage, often underscored by return visits to China the motherland. This development is not without its ironies. Lynn Pan has made the astute remark that the very quest for ethnic self-discovery and identity is a mark of Americanness, not Chineseness: “To the villagers in Toishan, the Chinese American who returns to rediscover his origins is doing a very American thing, for the last thing *they* feel is the need for roots” (Pan 1990, 295). Pan informs us that Toishan village has taken advantage of this diasporic longing by tapping into the “roots business” in the United States, offering tours to ancestral villages and wooing investments by returning local sons. Here, diaspora consciousness is expressly encouraged by the homeland because it is economically profitable. But these developments only confirm the empirical observation that the social and discursive production of the Chinese diaspora—a process driven by a passionate identification with and reification of “Chineseness” as a globally relevant marker for identity and difference—is in full swing. The power of diaspora here is ideological and emotional rather than institutional: it works through the imagination (Appadurai 1996a).

It is to provide a counterbalance against this absolutising tendency in the vision of diaspora that I foreground the importance of hybridity. Theories of hybridity, however problematic, are crucial in our attempts to overcome what Rita Felski (1997) has termed the doxa of difference. As she puts it:

Metaphors of hybridity and the like not only recognize differences *within* the subject, fracturing and complicating holistic notions of identity, but also address connections *between* subjects by recognizing affiliations cross-pollinations, echoes and repetitions, thereby unseating difference from a position of absolute privilege. Instead of endorsing a drift towards ever greater atomization of identity, such metaphors allow us to conceive of multiple, interconnecting axes of affiliation and differentiation (Felski 1997, 12).

I agree with authors such as Garcia Canclini and Ulf Hannerz that to understand cultural globalisation today it is the processes of hybridisation that need to be at the centre of our attention (Garcia Canclini 1995 and 2000; Hannerz 1996). As Garcia Canclini has remarked, hybridity provides us with a conceptual “point of departure from which to break from fundamentalist tendencies and from the fatalism of the doctrines of civilizing wars” (Garcia Canclini 2000, 48).

To be sure, taking processes of hybridity seriously as productive of “a field of energy and sociocultural innovation” (Garcia Canclini 2000, 49) has become rather commonplace in contemporary cultural studies. What has been less emphasised however is that pervasive hybridity also has radical ramifications for how we think of different “peoples”. Indeed, as hybridisation consists of exchanges, crossings, and mutual entanglements, it necessarily implies a softening of the boundaries between “peoples”: the encounters *between* them are as constitutive of who they are as the proceedings *within*. These encounters are not always harmonious or conciliatory; often they are extremely violent, as the history of colonialism has amply shown. But even in the most oppressive situations, different “peoples” who are thrown into intercultural confrontation with each other, whether by force or by will, have to negotiate

their differences if they are to avoid war. The result, after many centuries of contact history, is a profoundly hybridised world where boundaries have become utterly porous, even though they are artificially maintained. As Garcia Canclini asserts: “It is not possible to say where the British end and where the colonies begin, where the Spanish end and the Latin Americans begin, where Latin Americans begin and where the indigenous do. None of these groups still remain within their original limits” (Garcia Canclini 2000, 49).

In parallel, we can say that centuries of global Chinese migrations have inevitably led to a blurring of the original limits of “the Chinese”: it is no longer possible to say with any certainty where the Chinese end and the non-Chinese begin. Indeed, the very attempt to draw such a line would amount to a form of discursive reductionism, if not symbolic violence, which disparages the long history of profound imbrication of Chinese peoples in the world as they have dispersed themselves all over the globe. Obviously “(non-)Chinese”, here, is to be defined in more than strictly biological terms, not just as “race”—with all its complicated connotations—but in cultural terms, in terms of the meanings and practices that we have over the centuries come to think of as what sets “Chinese” culture apart from others. Wherever notionally Chinese communities and individuals routinely enter into relations with others, live and work together with “non-Chinese”, processes of hybridisation are set in train that inevitably transform everyone involved. It is in these borderzones that the fuzziness of the identity line can be best recognised and where the fundamental uncertainty about where the Chinese end and the non-Chinese begin can be empirically examined.

Take the case of global Sydney. Sydney is located within the nation-state of Australia, but its status as a transnational global city is affirmed by the fact that it receives by far the largest proportion of all migrants from all over the world coming into the country every year. Many of these are of Chinese descent. Surveys of “the Chinese in Australia”, whose numbers have increased substantially in the past few decades, now point routinely to the diversity of the Chinese population, having migrated to Australia from different previous countries of residence (Ho and Coughlan 1997; Inglis 1998). Thus, Chinese from the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and East Timor, as well as those born in Australia, now share the metropolitan space of Sydney (together with many other ethnic groupings originating from all over the world). The global city, then, is a meeting place of large sections of the dispersed diaspora, where “Chinese” of very different and largely unconnected histories have the opportunity to intersect and interact not in virtual cyberspace (as in the Huaren website), but in actual social space. It should not come as a surprise that these disparate groups have hardly recognised themselves as belonging to a singular Chinese community, even if the predominant mode of categorising would insist on it. As Christine Inglis observes,

[a]ttempts to bring the plethora of [Chinese] groupings together within a unifying structure or umbrella at either the national or local level have so far been unsuccessful. The diversity of interests and backgrounds, as well as personal competition, has made it difficult to develop an organizational structure acceptable to all, and to identify individuals able to represent, or speak on behalf of, the Chinese community as a whole” (Inglis 1998, 282).

In this regard, one might ask whether it makes sense to speak of a unitary “Chinese community as a whole” in the first place!

Indeed, the very category of Chineseness, and who can or should be included in this category, can be the object of intense contestation amongst and between these groups. Here then we

have a clear case where what counts as Chinese (or not) is tortuously uncertain. Inglis remarks that one of the most isolated groups is the East Timorese Chinese, who after more than two decades in Australia are “only gradually developing contacts with other Chinese” (Inglis 1998, 285). The tricky formulation here is “other Chinese”, which too hastily serves to stress the presumed *commonalities* of East Timorese of Chinese ancestry with, say, Hong Kong Chinese or Vietnamese Chinese. But most East Timorese Chinese speak Hakka (if they still do), not a very widely used language in the other Chinese groups. Moreover, under the influence of the Portuguese who were the colonial rulers of East Timor until 1975, most East Timorese Chinese are Catholic and do not observe many traditional Chinese customs. I have been told that the East Timorese Chinese community in Sydney a few years ago decided to celebrate Chinese New Year in February together with some other Chinese groups in the city. This is a festivity that the East Timorese Chinese had long dropped from their annual program, so their taking it up can be described as a small but meaningful instance of resinicisation. After one year, however, they abandoned the event again because they didn’t feel comfortable partying with the other Chinese. Instead, they decided to celebrate something akin to “Chinese New Year” (signified by typical paraphernalia such as dragon dances) amongst themselves, but on the “regular” Christian New Year’s Day, the first of January². One might wonder whether “Chinese” is still useful to describe this very hybrid cultural practice? Is the category at all meaningful to these East Timorese communities, and if so why? The same questions can be asked, inter alia, about the Indonesian Chinese, most of whom speak Indonesian not Chinese and do not feel much affinity with other Chinese groups at all. To put it bluntly, why are they so readily counted in the Chinese diaspora and not the *Indonesian* diaspora?

In cities such as Sydney, the coming together of many different groups who have carried the label “Chinese” to describe themselves has exposed its contested nature and its failure to operate as a term of diasporic integration. In this sense, “Chineseness” is put under erasure, “not in the sense of being written out of existence but in the sense of being unpacked” (Chow 1998, 24), denaturalised and stripped of its self-evident cogency and coherence as a category of identity. The hybridising context of the global city brings out the intrinsic contradiction locked into the concept of diaspora, which, logically, depends on the maintenance of an apparently natural essential identity to secure its imagined status as a coherent community.

Hybridity then is a concept that confronts and problematises boundaries, although it does not erase them. As such, hybridity always implies an unsettling of identities. It is precisely our encounters at the border—where self and other, the local and the global, Asian and Western meet—that make us realise how riven with potential miscommunication and intercultural conflict these encounters can be. This tells us that hybridity, the very condition of in-betweenness, can never be a question of simple shaking hands, of happy, harmonious merger and fusion. Hybridity is not the solution, but alerts us to the difficulty of living with differences, their ultimately irreducible resistance to complete dissolution. In other words, hybridity is a heuristic device for analysing complicated entanglement.

If I were to apply this notion of complicated entanglement to my own personal situation, I would describe myself as suspended in-between: neither truly Western nor authentically Asian; embedded in the West yet always partially disengaged from it; disembedded from Asia yet somehow enduringly attached to it emotionally. I wish to hold onto this hybrid in-

² This ethnographic story comes from fieldwork amongst the East Timorese diaspora in Sydney by my PhD student Amanda Wise.

betweenness not because it is a comfortable position to be in, but because its very ambivalence is a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability that is a necessary condition for living together in difference. It is the *ambivalence* that is immanent to hybridity that needs to be highlighted, as we also need to examine the *specific contexts and conditions* in which hybridity operates—in Annie Coombes' words (1994), the how and who of it.

As Robert Young puts it, hybridity “is a key term in that wherever it emerges it suggests the impossibility of essentialism” (Young 1995, 27). This is to suggest then that while the rhetoric of hybridity can easily be put to political abuse if it is coopted in a discourse of easy multicultural and multiracial harmony, we cannot escape the predicament of hybridity as a real, powerful and pervasive force in a world in which complicated entanglement is the order of the day.

For postcolonial cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Trinh Minhha, Homi Bhabha and others, hybridity has an explicitly critical political purchase. They see the hybrid as a critical force that undermines or subverts, from inside out, dominant formations through the interstitial insinuation of the “different”, the “other” or the “marginalised” into the very fabric of the dominant. Hall and Gilroy for example insist on enunciating a hybrid speaking position they call “Black British”—a mode of self-representation designed to interrogate hegemonic “white” definitions of British national identity by interjecting it with blackness (see Ang and Stratton 1995). This procedure results, in Hall's words, in “a kind of hybridisation” of the English, “whether they like it or not” (quoted in Mercer 1994, 24). The politics of hybridity here then is one of active intervention, involving both a disarticulation of exclusionary conceptions of Britishness as essentially “white” and its rearticulation as a necessarily impure and plural formation that can no longer suppress the black other within. In this sense, hybridity is, as Coombes puts it, “an important cultural strategy for the political project of decolonisation” (Coombes 1994, 90). It destabilises established cultural power relations between white and black, coloniser and colonised, centre and periphery, the “West” and the “rest”, not through a mere inversion of these hierarchical dualisms, but by throwing into question these very binaries through a process of boundary-blurring transculturation.

Here we have a positive valuation of hybridity, but for reasons virtually opposed to that of what Jacquie Lo has aptly called “happy hybridity” (Lo 2000). While the latter is fuelled by hybridity's perceived potential to absorb difference into a new consensual culture of fusion and synthesis, for postcolonial migrants such as Hall and Gilroy no such consensual culture comes out of hybridity. Indeed, for them any apparent consensus or fusion can be revealed as partial, incomplete, and ultimately impossible, because the ideological closure on which it depends will always be destabilised by that difference that is too difficult to absorb or assimilate. In other words, any intercultural exchange will always face its moment of incommensurability, which disrupts the smooth creation of a wholesome synthesis or consensus (see Ang 1997). As David Scott has argued in his essay ‘The Permanence of Pluralism’, consensus “has now to be seen not as a final destination, a distant horizon, but as one moment in a larger relation permanently open to contestation, open to the moment when difference contests sites of normalized identity and demands a rearrangement of the terms, and perhaps even the very *idiom*, of consensus” (Scott 2000, 298). Hybridity here has interrogative effects; it is a sign of challenge and altercation, not of congenial amalgamation or merger. To refer to the Australian context, the vision of an “Asianisation” of Australia provides a clear example of how uncomfortable and threatening the idea of a hybrid future can be for some: hybridity, in this case, does not stand for a new national harmony but for

cross-cultural anxiety, fear of the undigestible difference—"Asianness"—that would transform Australia as a whole.

The postcolonial concept of hybridity problematises the concept of *ethnicity* that underlies the dominant discourses of "diaspora". Ethnicity, as Arjun Appadurai has noted, is "the idea of naturalized group identity" (Appadurai 1996a, 13), and diaspora relies on the "ethnic group" as the main constituent of the diasporic community. But as I have argued earlier, the very consciousness of the "ethnic group" in and for itself—say, "the Chinese" or any combinatory, hyphenated specification of it—is not the result of some spontaneous, primordial idea of kinship but depends on the active mobilisation of certain differences to articulate group identity (Appadurai 1996a, 13). The discourse and practice of diaspora is profoundly implicated in this very process of cultural mobilisation of ethnic identity. It logically operates as a conceptual brake on the idea of hybridity because in the end, it (diaspora) cannot exist without a reification of ethnicity, and therefore of a naturalised essentialism and closure.

To be sure, ethnicity is a very powerful mode of collective identification in the globalising world of today. Ethnic categories exert their influence either as bureaucratic fictions—as in official policies of multiculturalism—or as imagined communities constructed from below, by "ethnics" themselves, as a means of accentuating "our" difference in a context of fluid coexistence with many heterogeneous others. Diasporas are the globalised embodiments of such ethnicised imagined communities. The very ubiquity of ethnic claims today points to the apparent paradox of ethnicity's mobilising power in a thoroughly hybridised world. In this context, as Pnina Werbner points out, "we have to recognise the differential interests social groups have in sustaining boundaries" (Werbner 1997a, 22). She considers the question "why borders, boundaries and 'pure' identities remain so important, the subject of defensive and essentialising actions and reflections, and why such essentialisms are so awfully difficult to transcend" (Werbner 1997a, 4). Indeed, in arguing *for* hybridity I am not denying the cultural and political significance of ethnic identifications today; nor do I wish to essentialise essentialism by suggesting that all (self)-essentialising strategies are the same and necessarily "bad". After all, as the important case of Indigenous identity suggests, essentialism can operate as "a political weapon in a public struggle for state resources, citizenship rights or a universal morality" (Werbner 1997b, 249). However, while the politics of ethnicity—either in diaspora or in multiculturalism—can be enormously empowering, its broader effects are not always benign or beneficial. On the contrary, as Werbner remarks: "Policy decisions, state fund allocations, racial murders, ethnic cleansing, anti-racist struggles, nationalist conflicts or revivals, even genocide, follow on essentialist constructions of unitary, organic cultural collectivities" (Werbner 1997b, 229). In other words, identity politics is never innocent; its implications and effects are not predetermined but depend on context.

It is in this light that the importance of hybridity needs to be stressed. In his book *Pluralism*, Gregory McLennan has commented that the problem with hybridity is that it "does not easily produce a *people*" (McLennan 1995, 90). He is right. I would argue however that precisely because essentialising and divisive claims to ethnicity and the assertion of distinct and separate "peoples" are so rampant today, we urgently need to lay stress on the unsettling horizon of hybridisation. The sheer force of identity politics is a reason "why [cultural hybridity] is experienced as dangerous, difficult or revitalising despite its quotidian normalcy" (Werbner 1997a, 4). We live in the paradoxical situation, then, where hybridity is still seen as a problem or an anomaly despite the fact that it is everywhere, because it is identity that has been privileged as the naturalised principle for social order. Therefore, it is the very preoccupation with demarcating the line between "Chinese" and "non Chinese",

“Asian” and “Western”, “Islam” and “the West”—that is, the preoccupation with boundary-setting and boundary maintenance— that needs to be problematised.

Against such essentialising moves, I wish to conclude by holding up just one hybrid image: that of the Westernised Chinese figure of the banana—“yellow outside, white inside”. The figure of the banana is often criticised as “not Chinese enough”, or being “too Westernised”—as in the critique of Chinese Canadians or Chinese Australians who do not know their “roots”. Instead, I would argue that the banana is representative of the porousness of identities and, more importantly, of the fact that all identities evolve and take shape through daily and multiple interrelationships with myriad, differently positioned others. These interrelationships, whether economic, political, professional, cultural or personal, are never power-free, but they cannot be avoided and they are the stuff that makes up the invention of social life today. In the globalised world of the twenty-first century, ethnicity and diaspora remain powerful forces of identification, but their effectiveness is always partially undermined by the forces of hybridisation. It is a world that is described by Iris Marion Young (1990) as the “‘being together’ of strangers”: a world in which the complicated entanglement of togetherness in difference has become the rule rather than the exception. Now more than ever, we have the responsibility to think for the world as a whole rather than for any particularist identity or community: it means moving beyond diaspora, into hybridity.

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