Boundaries on Fire: Hybridity and the Political Economy of Culture

by

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ABSTRACT

Current debates about globalization have generated interest in hybridity, a term which refers to the identities, representations and productions of people who live between cultures that are perceived to be fixed geographically. The complex relationships between producers and consumers of hybrid commodities constitute the political economy of culture. This economy obscures the hidden hegemonies within globalization, and makes authenticity the exchange value of cross-cultural commodities and their producers. Control over the production of hybridity is manipulated by transnational culture industries, in order to defuse the hybrid's transgressive properties and reclaim hybridity as symbol of global homogenization. This thesis examines several hybrid cultural productions and producers, including Deepa Mehta's 1997 film *Fire*; *Star Rise*, a 1997 tribute album to the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan; and musical groups Asian Dub Foundation and The Fire This Time. These examples illustrate the manipulation of hybridity within the political economy of culture.

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DEDICATION

To my parents and my family on the other side of the date line.

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Introduction

Globalization is presently a controversial and provocative concept in the social sciences and humanities as well as in popular media. Political theorists, economists, media pundits, literary critics, social activists, artists, film makers, musicians and authors have disparate views on the wide range of issues that fall under this term, such as expanding technologies, the movement of people between nations, transnational corporatization and world trade, environmental and labour practices, and cultural production, appropriation, and cooptation. There is no single definition of globalization that summarizes these perspectives: the term points ambiguously to the perception of cultural, economic, and political changes in the world-system.

Frederic Jameson metaphorizes globalization as "the proverbial elephant, described by its blind observers" (xi). He identifies four categories of perspectives on globalization: first, that there is no such thing as globalization and that nations exist as they have before; second, that globalization as a process has always existed and is evident even in early human history; third, that globalization is the logical extension of capitalism; and fourth, the perspective that best represents his own position, that globalization is an intrinsic feature of a new capitalism aligned with postmodernity (54). These general categories do not reflect the complexity of contemporary perspectives on these issues, but Jameson does illustrate the wide range of opinion in the globalization debate.

For Stuart Hall, globalization is characterized by the emergence of a global mass culture, "dominated by the image that crosses and recrosses linguistic frontiers much more rapidly and more easily and that speaks across languages in a much more immediate way" (Hall 178). This universalization, he says, is not utopian; rather it elides the cultural and political hegemonies in the history of the production of culture. While the margin has become a "powerful space," it maintains that power only insofar as cultural difference and hegemonies are themselves maintained. The question becomes, "Do those on the margins have to be trapped in the place from which they begin to speak?" (Hall 185). While the idea of a global mass culture appears to even out the field for marginalized people, and open up spaces for them to speak, it continues to rely on national, ethnocultural, racial and sexual differences in order to prove its own diversity. These differences are always based on the relationship of the other to the dominant white Western culture, which is most often the owner of the means of cultural production.

Many theorists, including Hall, situate this contradiction in the space between the global and the local, between the virtual imaginings of globalization and the realities of people who live within it. For Arif Dirlik, whose concept of global capitalism builds on Jameson's work, the central feature of globalization is its reinvention of the local as a site of resistance to and manipulation by global capital: "Ironically, even as it seeks to homogenize populations globally, consuming their cultures, global capitalism enhances awareness of the local, pointing to it also as the site of resistance to capital" (1996, 35). For both Dirlik and Hall, the process of globalization seeks to maintain the local as an authentic site of resistance, only so that it may then be absorbed into a homogeneous universal culture. In the slippage that occurs between the global and the local, between

global capitalism's desire for a universal culture and people's lived experience of cultural and economic hegemonies, certain questions about globalization are revealed: How can a global culture be theorized in the face of such unequal political relations? To what extent do the economic and cultural concepts of the global rely on the maintenance of cultural authenticity and location in order to give itself meaning? And, central to the concerns I raise here, how are contemporary cultural productions deployed to subvert or support the claims of globalization?

In the pages that follow, I will explore these questions by examining several cultural productions that are created through this slippage. These cultural productions disturb, in various ways, globalization's desire for authenticity and thirst for universalization. I use the term "hybrid" to refer to the identities, representations and productions of people who live between cultures that are perceived to be fixed geographically. These productions are not easily identified within a national, ethnic, or cultural heritage; instead they are sites of tension, signifiers of or against globalization.

In popular and academic discourse, cultural productions that can be identified as part of an ethnocultural heritage have been valued by their ability to authentically represent national or ethnic identity. Postcolonialism, which has dominated studies of these cultural productions for the last few decades, has opened up room for the questioning of the fixity of cultures. But the discourse of postcolonialism, which relies upon the historicity of nations and colonization, is not adequate for the study of cultural productions that are not so easily linked to a specific nationhood. Hybridity, which carries its own internal contradictions, provides a more flexible framework for the discussion of such productions.

Hybrid cultural productions walk a precarious line between cultural locations, equally conscious of the desire to claim cultural signification and of the need to obscure or critique such delineations of cultural borders. Western critics often hold up cultural productions of diasporic people as examples of 'multiculturalism,' and laud the international success of their producers as a symbol of global cosmopolitanism. Paul Gilroy says that authenticity "enhances the appeal of selected cultural commodities and has become an important element in the mechanism of the mode of racialisation necessary to making non-European and non-American musics acceptable items in expanded pop market" (99). This applies also to other forms of cultural production, like film and literature. The way in which authenticity is evaluated, and the reaction and interpretation of audiences, differs between the West (North America or Europe) and other parts of the world. Market value for authenticity and the criteria for judging it change with cultural location and are highly affected by the perceived need of peripheral nations to produce and maintain a national identity that can take to the global stage. A cultural production which might be perceived in the West as 'authentically' Indian might in India be considered a product of Western 'corruption.' For a hybrid production to be highly valued, its ethnic origins must be clearly apparent to the consumer. Thus, ethnic or cultural authenticity is frequently the major criterion for the evaluation of a hybrid cultural production.

There is a complex relationship between those who create hybrid cultural productions, whose own identities might signify as hybrid, those who engage in the analysis and exploration of these productions, and those who are responsible for the commodification and marketing of such productions. Producers, writers, musicians, and

filmmakers, exist in an uneasy relationship with the way in which they and their productions are represented by the media, and the way in which they are targeted towards particular audiences.

I argue that these relationships constitute what I call the political economy of culture. This economy is a perspective on the systems of globalization which manipulate the international flow of financial and cultural capital. It is an economy in which authenticity becomes the exchange value of cross-cultural commodities and their producers. The political economy of culture obscures the hidden hegemonies within globalization, presenting instead the idea of a world of cultural commodities available at one's door step. At the centre of cultural political economy lies the problem of agency, of control over the production of culture and identity. A study of the machinations of this economy exposes the relations of production and structures of power and agency behind the making of hybrid cultural productions. Control over the production of hybridity is manipulated by transnational culture industries, in order to defuse the hybrid's transgressive properties and reclaim it as symbol of global homogenization.

In order to explore these questions and concepts in depth, this thesis will examine several hybrid cultural productions within the framework of cultural political economy. The first chapter will discuss Deepa Mehta's 1997 film *Fire*, which tells the story of two sisters-in-law who develop a lesbian relationship. There are several issues about hybrid cultural productions raised by the film itself, the cultural political economy that facilitated its making, and the reception of the film in the media. Mehta is a Canadian filmmaker of Indian descent. *Fire* was made on location in Delhi, using Indian actors. However, financing for the film came from Canada, and a predominantly Canadian crew

was employed in its production. The film, which Mehta wrote almost entirely in English, received fairly good reviews when it was released in North America, first at the Toronto Film Festival, and then at various cinemas in Canada and the U.S. When it was released in India the following year, the lesbian content of the film caused an enormous controversy. This controversy in turn made the film even more successful in the West, affording it currency as an authentic postcolonial social commentary. The film's reception in both India and North America centred around the question of the authenticity of Indian lesbians: while North American reviewers were initially impressed with the cultural realism of the film, Indian filmgoers and government officials railed against what they felt to be a misrepresentation of Indian women's sexuality. The question of the film's cultural authenticity is echoed by questions of Mehta's authenticity as an Indian-Canadian film maker. Mehta identifies herself and her film as postcolonial, and as hybrid. My interrogation of the film, and the circumstances of its production, will contrast the applicability of the term "postcolonial" with the other, more flexible term hybridity.

Through my discussion of *Fire* I will develop the concept of hybridity in the context of cultural political economy. In the second chapter I will apply these concepts, shifting attention to the United Kingdom where in the last several years a new musical movement generally referred to as the Asian Underground has emerged. The Asian Underground, which identifies a musical style as well as a loose community of musicians, is predominantly made up of young first- or second- generation South Asian immigrants. The music they make incorporates hip-hop and electronic dance music

influences, and refers to South Asian music and culture through sampling, use of traditional instruments and lyrics in South Asian languages.

The 1997 release *Star Rise* is a tribute collection of dance music re-mixes of songs by Qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Khan, who died in 1998, was widely considered in his native Pakistan and abroad to be the best singer of the Qawwali form. In the latter part of his career he collaborated with Western musicians and producers, and was accused of "selling out" to the West by Pakistani critics. *Star Rise* was released on Real World Records, a company established by British rock musician Peter Gabriel. The company is mostly known for its "world music" releases, particularly from third world nations, and for its distribution of these recordings in the North American and European markets.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, *Star Rise*, and the Asian Underground are at once products and producers in the transnational music industry. The extensive financial and marketing power of transnational record companies allow them to control the production and distribution of "world music" to a large degree. World music is a category which refers to music that is ethnically different from Western popular music, and therefore, is heavily reliant on authenticity in defining a production's value. *Star Rise* is a hybrid production which troubles this notion of authenticity, but can also serve as an example of how such a production might be used by transnational industry to support cultural political economy's version of globalization. I argue that *Star Rise* occurs precisely at the intersection of national culture and global economy: it is the hybrid location of the Asian Underground musicians that allows them to produce a commodity for which there is demand in "global" culture. Though their straddling of multiple cultural and artistic

histories seems to place them outside of a purely nationalist mentality, it is precisely national identity that defines the Asian Underground for its largely Western audience.

Star Rise offers a working example of the power of transnational corporations over cultural production. In the third chapter, I will examine some of the ways in which cross-cultural productions attempt to subvert this hegemony, by operating independently from these industries, by using alternative modes of distribution, and by incorporating activist work into artistic projects. One example of this is the international music collective *The Fire This Time*, which incorporates music from around the world with radical activism. The group includes people of African and Indian diasporic, as well as North, South and Central American indigenous origins, and their music and activist work are directed towards indigenous rights struggles in various parts of the world. I argue that while producers such as these do not, and can not, exist outside of cultural political economy, they can work to resist and subvert its structures.

Postcolonialism and Hybridity

In order to situate my use of the term hybridity throughout this paper, I want to contrast it with the other, related term postcolonialism. Postcolonialism arises out of the study of literatures of nations which were colonized, usually by European countries, and which have undergone or continue to experience a process of decolonization. Helen Tiffin, Bill Ashcroft, and Gareth Griffiths, who co-edited the 1989 anthology *The Empire Writes Back,* and *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995) state that

> 'post-colonial theory' has existed for a long time before that particular name was used to describe it. Once colonized peoples had cause to reflect

> on and express the tension which ensued from this problematic and contested, but eventually vibrant and powerful mixture of imperial language and local experience, post-colonial 'theory' came into being.[1]

This rather simplistic and facile explanation fails to take into account questions of diaspora, of history prior to colonialism, and the work of postcolonial critics living in the first world. In the last two decades postcolonial discourse has undergone a series of reworkings and interrogations which have broadened its scope, and many of these are represented in the essays encapsulated in the *Reader.* The introduction of postcolonialism in literary and cultural studies has opened up a great deal of discussion about culture, ethnicity and relations of power.

Jameson, whose work on postmodernism and late capitalism has been influential in the current globalization debate, argued in his 1986 essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," that postcolonial literatures always constitute national allegories of the "third world."[2] His claim was subsequently and vigorously refuted by many critics located in both first and third world academe. It was argued against not only because of the contention around the totalizing effect of the allegory, but also because the identification of the "third world" brought into question the homogenization of diverse cultures, ranging from India, Africa and the Caribbean to China and Latin America. Aijaz Ahmad's 1992 refutation of Jameson asks:

> [I]f the motivating force for history here is neither class formation and class struggle nor the multiplicities of intersecting conflicts based upon class, gender, nation, race, region, and so on, but the unitary 'experience'

> of national oppression (if one is merely the object of history, the Hegelian slave) then what else can one narrate but that national oppression? (102)

Speaking from an explicitly Marxist position, Ahmad raises an important point about the plurality of discourses which are subsumed by the rhetoric of nationalism. As Partha Chatterjee notes, the focus on anticolonial nationalist struggles in postcolonial criticism ignores the subjects marginalized within that struggle, namely, women, ethnic and religious minorities.[3] Postcolonialism seems to make irrelevant cultural and historical events which occured before colonialism. On the other side of that coin, nations which are currently undergoing anticolonial struggles, or which continue to exist under colonialism, are included in the same category.

Postcolonial theory has also been criticized for its location in the first world, both in terms of theoretical grounding and in terms of representation. Key intellectuals in the field tend to be located in privileged academic positions in Europe and North America, prompting Dirlik to comment that "the popularity that the term 'postcolonial' has achieved in the last few years has less to do with its rigorousness as a concept, or the new vistas it has opened up for critical inquiry, than it does with the increased visibility of academic intellectuals of Third World origin within the area of cultural criticism" (1997, 501).

Postcolonialism has, with what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call its "magnetic aura," expanded in enough directions that it is no longer as focused on the criticism of nationalism and colonialism as it once was. 'Postcolonial' has, in fact, frequently taken the place of terms like 'ethnic' and 'third world' in academic discourses. It has become a sign that marks ethnic difference. That difference becomes not the polyvalent difference

between cultural specificities, but the difference between the centre, the West, or the North, depending on one's critical perspective, and the periphery, the East, the South—the Other.

Popular culture has embraced some concepts which have arisen out of the postcolonial theoretical framework, especially in regard to globalization and cultural mixing through colonialism, diaspora, biraciality, and polylingualism. Hybridity is one such term which has been deployed in the popular media, but it is also widely explored among academics. Homi K. Bhabha, one of the most influential theorists working with this term, describes the space of the hybrid as a 'third' or in-between space, a space occupied not only by those who travel across national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries, but also by the difference between the lived experiences of the people of a nation, and the nation's representation of itself. [4] Other critics have questioned the efficacy of this term, which seems to offer an expression for the growing difficulty in identifying cultural location, but seems also to ignore histories of oppression and racism. Shohat and Stam argue that the term "fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity: colonial imposition, obligatory assimilation, political cooptation, cultural mimicry, and so forth" (43).

While postcolonialism's historical position is rigidly located in histories of colonization and decolonization, hybridity posits the danger of denying those and other histories which necessarily affect the meaning of cultural mixing. Pnina Werbner criticizes Bhabha for what she calls the conflation of "distorted specularities of colonial/racial desire with the hybridities and multiplicities of ethnicity or multiculturalism" (19). At the same time, hybridity offers a way to talk about cultural in-

betweenness without limiting that discussion to interactions between colonizer and colonized. Bhabha's concept of in-between space is useful to my conceptualization of hybridity, as is Werbner's interpretation of Bakhtin's distinction between organic hybridity as the inevitable changes and mutations of culture, and intentional, aesthetic hybridity: "[O]rganic hybridity creates the historical foundations on which aesthetic hybrids build to shock, change, challenge, revitalize or disrupt through deliberate, intended fusions of unlike social languages and images" (Werbner 5). This version of hybridity exposes the element of agency which is necessary for the interpretation of hybrid productions in the cultural political economy.

I argue that this conceptualization of hybridity allows for a more open and flexible theorization of culture which is not so intrinsically dependent on a singular national cultural identity for definition. In order for the term to perform this way, however, it is necessary to deploy it within the context of cultural history, appropriation, domination, and oppression. Hybridity was as present in the lives of Metis people in 19th century Canada as it is now present in the universal passports of the European Union. These situations clearly occupy different social, economic and historical contexts. It is a term that must therefore be always be interpreted coextensively with the socio-historical context in which it is applied. It is in this fashion that I intend to use hybridity within the context of globalization and cultural political economy.

Globalization often obfuscates relations of power at the global level. Perhaps the best example of this is the internet, often pointed to as the ultimate symbol and proof of the process of globalization. Global citizens from throughout the world are able to instantaneously communicate with each other, share information, and build communities

based not on geography, language or ethnicity, but on diverse mutual affinities. Nonetheless, email and web site domain addresses are largely identified on the basis of national origin ('.ca' for Canada, '.uk' for the United Kingdom, although interestingly the US does not use this type of suffix) and the predominant language of the internet continues to be English. Public and private individual access to the internet is much greater in industrialized countries, and, of course, the dominance of Microsoft in the software industry ensures that the economy of the internet is located in the United States.

To take the concepts of the global and the local in the context of the internet as analogous to the operation of globalization at large, it is clear that these concepts exist in a Manichaean relationship with each other. The global does not exist without the sum of its diverse parts; it must draw on difference in order to illustrate its universality. The hybrid exists in the history of imperialism, conquest, and racism and in the space between the global and the local. Hybridity in this context becomes a site of political contestation, because it refers not only to the many grey areas which exist between cultural absolutes, but also to the uneasy and tenuous hyphenated space of the people and productions who occupy those spaces. Hybrid cultural productions as commodities are valued either as representations of global culture, or as representations of cultural authenticity.

Authenticity, Fetishism and Cultural Political Economy

Among theorists who agree that globalization is indeed rendering change in global cultural and economic systems, there is a variety of interpretations of its impact and meaning. Arjun Appadurai, for example, contends that globalization "does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization," and that its

disjunctures and fluid landscapes create new ways of talking about difference.[5] Masao Miyoshi, in contrast, argues that transnational corporations, the key economic signifiers of globalization, "rationalize and and execute the objectives of colonialism with greater efficiency and rationalism" (1996, 96).

My interpretation of globalization through the concept of hybridity lies ambivalently between these positions. While I agree with Appadurai that globalization need not always equal the negative effects of cultural homogenization, the transnational corporate control of the culture industry does perpetuate something like colonialism in practice, claiming and occupying hybrid spaces in the name of globalization. I argue that the effects of globalization are clearly apparent in the transnational corporatization of media. It is apparent in the movement of finance, and it is equally apparent in the traffic of culture. This relationship may be understood in terms of the commodification of both cultural productions and their producers. Films, texts, music and other media, which have satisfied the Western need for consumption of the "third world," are translated into categories like "world music," postcolonial literature, and as evidence of the "global village." Producers of such media find themselves in a position where identity has market value, where it is the borders, be they cultural or geographical, which function as the mitigating and defining terms of artistic and intellectual significance..

The location and representation of cultural difference in these very different cultural productions troubles the boundaries of nationhood, without which it is impossible to theorize a diverse global culture. In the imagined global economy, culture is constructed as a fluid and contradictory ground in which its representations are

simultaneously valued for their ability to locate and identify culture, and their ability to cross territorial and economic borders.

Postcolonial and hybrid people and their cultural productions become commodities, and authenticity becomes the basis of their value-coding. The more 'realistic' the portrayal of an 'exotic' culture, the greater its value. As Rey Chow comments, " the invisible interrogation behind the multicultural "ethnicity" apparatuses is: 'How authentic are you?'" (1998, 102). Cultural political economy uses precisely this kind of apparatus in determining the value of cultural commodities traded within it. The authenticity of hybrid productions is evaluated by their ability to portray both the reality of multiple cultures, and the reality of 'in-betweenness.' In this light, the accumulation of cultural commodities signifies a wealth characterized by 'cultural diversity' or 'multiculturalism', which, Miyoshi maintains, is "a luxury largely irrelevent to those who live under the most wretched conditions" (1996, 95). In practice, this accumulation works very much like tourism, where travelers desire the most authentic experience of being in a foreign land, and where often one's stature as a traveller is evaluated by the extensiveness of one's journeys.

The accumulation of cultural commodities is slightly different, because the consumer does not have to be mobile—technologies and industries make it easy for the consumer to effectively travel without leaving home. Rather than collecting one's own experiences as a traveler, one collects representations of other's experiences. The market that I have in mind here is rather specific: it consists mainly of people living in North America and Europe, and of people who are mainly white. This is true for several reasons, but most significantly because the desire for cultural accumulation can only exist

in this manner when the consumer perceives his/herself to be culturally neutral: the Other is the ethnic, exotic, the multicultural.

This desire, then, can be described as fetishistic in both Freudian and Marxist terms. It is the desire to possess that which one is not, and does not have, the desire to possess the Other. It is also the fetishism of the commodity, which, according to Marx, is "the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relationship between things" (165). These versions of fetishism are, in the sense that I use the term, closely linked. An authentic cultural commodity is imagined to bestow upon its owner some semblance of the experience represented by it. But this fetishistic desire, through Marx's words, conjures up another image. Hybrid cultural productions seem to be deeply connected to issues of their producers' identities, because that identity provides the first and most important signification of authorial authenticity. If identity, in this way, also becomes a value-coded commodity, then ownership of the associated cultural productions allows the consumer to also possess the representation of an identity.

In the context of the political economy of culture, several questions are raised about hybrid cultural productions. For what audience are these productions constructed/targeted? How is the meaning of these cultural productions modified by the relationship between audience and producer? To what extent are the producers constructed in the Western media as authentic voices of the 'radical'? How might controversy generated by such productions increase their market value? How are hybrid productions interpreted by their signification of cultural dissonance as well as their ability

to 'transcend culture?' How are these 'cross-cultural' productions defined by their fixed cultural positions?

The examples of cross-cultural productions I examine here frame these questions, problematizing issues of authenticity and cultural identification as the criteria for value, as well as the socio-economic factors which control cultural production in media. In the chapters that follow, I intend to show that what we have come to call globalization is an effect of cultural political economy. Cultural productions which are hybrid become fetishized commodities. They are often manipulated by those who control production, via distribution, financing, promoting or publishing, in order to maximize their appeal to the greatest market. In some cases, that appeal comes at the cost of the political efficacy of the hybrid project. In other cases, it reinforces the radical nature of hybridity through its contradictions. Hybrid cultural productions, I argue, should be evaluated not by authenticity, but on the basis of the agency of its producer.

NOTES: Introduction

[1] "General Introduction." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995.

[2] Frederic Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital." *Social Text*, 1986 pp 65-88.

[3] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist resolution of the Women's Question." *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Eds. KumKum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, pp 233-253.

[4] These themes are discussed throughout the *Location of Culture*, a collection of essays by Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1994).

[5] See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, pages 17 and 34 (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996).

Boundaries On Fire: Hybridity And The Political Economy Of Culture

Chapter One

At a screening of *Fire* in Trivandrum, India, at the beginning of 1998, director Deepa Mehta was accosted by a man who, irate over the film's representation of a lesbian relationship between two Indian women, threatened, "I'm going to shoot you, madam."[1] This extraordinary expression of violence, recounted by Mehta herself, is a poignant example of the explosively negative reaction the film received at its release in India, and marks the height of the controversy surrounding *Fire*.

The circumstances of the film's release and promotion, its reception in the media, and the narratives explored in the film itself provide a fascinating example of the commodification of postcolonial and hybrid identities in a political economy of culture. It is a process of commodification in which the value of these identities is based on the fetishized and exoticized conception of their authenticity. This process is as evident in the film as it is in the circumstances of its making, and is mirrored by the thoughts and experiences of its maker. In this chapter, I will explore the mechanisms of this process by examining the controversy engendered by the film and the border-troubling aspects of the film's narrative. Central to the study of this process of commodification is the examination of the concepts of postcoloniality and hybridity in relation to Mehta and her film, and the way in which such concepts are deployed in and by the media.

Mehta emigrated from India to Canada, where she works as a film maker. She says of herself, "I'm not really Indian, I'm not really Canadian. I'm a bit of both or a lot

of one and a lot of the other. But I feel lost. I don't know where I belong."[2] She was born in Amritsar, India, in 1950, where her family fled to escape the riotous violence that wracked Lahore during Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.[3] *Earth*, the second film in a trilogy of which *Fire* is the first, is a story of Partition seen through the eyes of a Parsee child.[4]

In 1973, Mehta moved with her Canadian husband to Toronto, where she has lived since. Previous to *Fire*, Mehta was best known for her award-winning documentary film work, but her feature films *Sam and Me* (1991) and *Camilla* (1994) received varied reviews, and little critical attention. *Sam and Me*, set in Toronto, is a film about a young Indian immigrant who befriends an old Jewish man; it explores some of the complex issues of cultural difference, diaspora, and identity that are present in *Fire*, although in rather different ways, and issues that Mehta has confronted in her own life.

In an interview, Mehta comments, "For better or worse, I'm the product of a post-colonial society."[5] Having spent large parts of her life on two separate continents, she describes her work and herself as "hybrid," the result of the merging of different cultures and ideologies. Her use of these terms resonates in the film itself, the circumstances of its production, and the reception of the film and Mehta herself in the media. Superficially, these terms may be seen to denote a similar meaning, but each comes attached to a number of subtle and complex political and cultural connotations. After studying the film and its production in further detail, I will return to these terms to evaluate the usefulness of each in the context of cultural political economy.

Fire premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, 1997. Though the audience at the festival were impressed with the film, print reviews were not

terribly generous; one reviewer called the film "a beautiful and ambitious failure."[6] The film was fairly successful in the United States, where it played mostly in repertory and art house theatres and festivals. It was released in India at about the same time that Mehta's fourth feature, *Earth*, premiered at the Toronto festival in the fall of 1998.

The film tells the story of two women, Radha and Sita. Sita marries Radha's husband's younger brother. The marriage is arranged, and Sita does not meet her husband or his traditional Hindu family prior to the wedding. She arrives in Delhi, and is immediately recruited into the family's daily routine, helping to run two businesses, a restaurant and video rental shop, and caring for her aged mother-in-law, who is mute and immobile due to a stroke. Jatin, Sita's husband, is carrying on an affair with a Chinese woman. Ashok, Radha's husband, devotes his time and money to studying with his guru, an old *sanyasi* racked with physical ailments which do not prevent him from bestowing gems of wisdom upon his loyal devotees. In the tradition of Hindu male religious devotion, Ashok decides to become celibate; since his wife is unable to conceive, he is relieved of the 'husbandly duty' of conjugal relations. Radha, for the thirteen years of her marriage, has been asked by Ashok to lie by his side in bed, so that he can test himself against sexual desire. The sexually vacant marriage leaves Radha depressed and empty. Sita, whose husband finds gratification elsewhere, and sees his wife as destined to be only a "baby-making machine," finds herself alone and confused in alien surroundings. Drawn together by their mutual rejection, and their ambivalence about the traditional roles ascribed to them as wives, the sisters-in-law begin an intimate emotional relationship that develops into a sexual one.

Fire's release in India caused an enormous amount of controversy. The lesbian content of the film was found extremely offensive by members of the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena organization, and their allies in the more moderate ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. With government intervention the film was banned, re-released, and returned to the censor board on a few occasions. In the theatres, Shiv Sena sent agitators to spark an already hostile viewing audience into rioting against the film, and in some cases in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi, theatres were looted, vandalized, and set on fire.

The controversy around the film seemed to be focused on its lesbian content, but even more deeply, on the right of a non-resident Indian to make a film about India that might be interpreted as an authentic representation of Indian culture. While some Indians were virulently opposed to the film, saying that lesbianism does not exist in India, that Mehta was a purveyor of a corrupt Western value-system, those in the West seemed impressed by her loyalty to her work, and the sexually progressive message of the film, which stands in stark contrast to the perceived conservatism and religious zeal of Indian Hindus.

LESBIANISM AND THE FEMININE IDEAL

Mehta says she wanted to make a film that was about choices, that would demystify India and challenge traditions.[7] With this statement, Mehta identifies her position in opposition to the religious conservativism that propelled the campaign against the film. It is this intention, more so than the representation of sexuality in the film, that is the site of controversy. She also declares her intention to illustrate an India different from

the mystical, exotic land of Western popular culture, but, as I will argue later, it is the exoticism of the film which garnered its success in North American markets.

In *Fire*, tradition is a recurring theme. In an early scene, Sita is caught in an act of cross-dressing on her first day with the family. In her bedroom, while she dances to a Hindi film song wearing a sari blouse and men's trousers, Radha comes to tell her that Biji, their mother-in-law, has been ringing her bell, and Sita has not heard it over the music. Because she cannot speak, Biji rings a bell to indicate her needs and distress. Rushing out of the bedroom to see what the matter is, Sita inadvertently appears in front of her mother-in-law dressed in this manner. Biji rings her bell in disapproval; Radha tells Sita that perhaps her "outfit" is the source of Biji's discomfort. Biji stands as the representative and arbiter of tradition, using her bell to express her approval and disapproval of her family's behaviour. Later on, Radha and Sita reenact a dance scene from a Hindi film, with Sita dressed as a boy. Biji smiles and nods, appreciating the fun the women are having, until it seems they are becoming more intimate; the camera observes Biji's expression fade into consternation.

There is an appreciable difference in Biji's reaction in these two cross-dressing scenes that is not just attributable to her increased familiarity with Sita. In the later scene, there is a degree of innocence evinced by the women who act like school-girls copying a typical Bollywood film scene. This activity seems to fit into accepted social norms until there is a noticeable sexual tension between them. In the earlier scene, Sita's actions immediately violate gender taboos: traditionally Hindu women do not wear trousers, especially not those belonging to men. Alone in the bedroom, after her newlywed husband has disappeared for the afternoon, Sita is clearly fascinated by his garment, and

gives the impression that she knows that she is doing something inappropriate. She unwinds the fabric of her traditional heavy wedding sari, leaving only the blouse, and slips on the trousers. As she admires herself in the mirror, Sita's outfit becomes something that she herself seems to find erotic; somewhere between masculinity and femininity, and certainly drawing upon American fashion ideals, the midriff baring combination of blouse and pants becomes much more provocative than the baseball-cap wearing play of the later scene. Radha's reaction on opening the door reflects this. Biji then, responds to aspects of these scenes which are explicitly sexual, or which clearly defy the laws of tradition. There is a traditional heterosexist relationship that is described by the Bollywood scene, and which is violated by the sexual ambiguity of Sita's cross-dressing and the intimate relationship of the two women. At the climactic moment when Radha and Sita's relationship is exposed to the family, Biji expresses her disapproval by spitting in Radha's face. With this act, Biji makes a clear pronouncement on the expectations of tradition.

As women living in a traditional Hindu household, Radha and Sita are expected to conform to the long tradition of the *pativrata*, or good wife. The wife is described in Hindu mythology and religious law as a loyal, maternal, subservient and monogamous woman, who does not find pleasure in sexual relations. In the film, the women observe a festival day called Karva Chauth, during which wives fast for the health and fortune of their husbands. This brings about a pivotal point in the film, for Sita cannot break her fast without her husband's blessing, and her husband is out for the evening with his lover. It is Radha who finally blesses Sita, and gives her permission to take a drink, and, in doing so steps into the role of husband.

Radha and Sita are, like most Hindu names, religiously significant, referring to two of the most well known Hindu goddesses. Sita is the wife of the God Rama, and it is her story which becomes the most significant in the themes of the film. In the Ramayana, an important Hindu religious text, Sita is a loyal and devoted wife, a *pativrata*.[8] When her husband is exiled to the forest for 14 years, she follows him despite danger and hardship. She endures being kidnapped by Rama's enemy Ravana, and is eventually rescued by her husband and his comrades. When they return to their kingdom so that he can take his rightful place as king, Rama tells her that she cannot continue to live with him as a wife because she has lived with another man and therefore may be impure. Sita, enraged, calls on the god of fire, Agni, to ignite a pyre, and tells Rama that she will walk through it. If, she says, she escapes the flames unscathed, she will prove her purity, and if she is tainted by sin, the fire will devour her. She emerges untouched, and Rama takes her back as his wife.

The story of Sita and her trial by fire is recounted and alluded to several times in the film, most notably in a Kathak dance performance of the story at the ashram of Ashok's guru, and in a scene where Mundu, the family servant, tells Sita that Biji likes him to play for her video tapes dramatizing the Ramayana. (In fact, he has been subjecting her to viewing pornographic video tapes. For Biji, who cannot speak to express her horror, this might be considered a different kind of trial by fire.) These references elaborate on Mehta's titular and thematic use of fire symbolism.

Less immediately apparent is the allusion to another goddess. Radha is the consort of Krishna, and presents a very different model of divine femininity:

> In contrast to Sita, who is the model of wifely devotion and loyalty, whose foremost concern is the reputation and well-being of her husband, Radha invests her whole being in an adulterous affair with the irresistably beautiful young Krishna. (Kinsley 81)

Radha, like Sita, is famous for her devotion, but is known for the wild abandon of her religious and sexual love, rather than the rigor of her piety. Krishna himself is known for his dalliances and is described in mythology as the lover of many women.

In the context of the film, both names are highly resonant, and Mehta plays with their various significations. In *Fire*, it is Sita's husband who is unfaithful, and Radha's who is consumed by religious devotion and is unable to accept her needs. It is also Radha who, in the climax of the film, must undergo the rite of fire. Ashok, enraged, pushes her towards the stove, where the end of her sari catches fire. Engulfed by flames, Radha must try to remove her sari, while her husband stands frozen watching her. This scene evokes another myth, the myth of Draupadi, whose captors attempt to humiliate her by unwinding the sari from her body, while divine intervention ensures a never-ending supply of cloth.

In this case, there is no limitless sari; instead, Radha survives the burning and, still clad in the burnt tatters of her sari, finds her way to a mosque to meet Sita. Her survival is perhaps the most provocative part of Mehta's use of the mythology. Lesbian sexual relationships, and in fact all sexual relationships, are considered impure in mainstream Vaishnavi Hinduism, and Radha's survival of the trial suggests the possibility of divine intervention or even approval of her actions. The use of a mosque as meeting place does not signify that Islam might be more accepting of their love than traditional

Hinduism; it does, however, evoke India's long history of communalist conflict, so that the mosque represents a refuge completely outside of the Hindu establishment.[9]

The names of the characters and their allusions to Indian history and mythology are extremely significant to the reception of the film's lesbian narrative. In a statement to the press, Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray said, "Why does the story revolve around a Hindu family? . . . Could not the filmmaker have named them Shabana, Saira or Najma?"[10] If Mehta changed the names in the film to Muslim ones, Thackeray said, his party would end its attacks on theatres showing the film; and in fact, in one Bombay theatre, the film was shown with the names censored in the dialogue.[11]

The majority of negative reaction to the film was voiced by the Shiv Sena party, a Hindu nationalist party which believes that Muslims should not live under separate law in India, and exhorts a return to traditional Hindu values.[12] Many party members and agitators believed the film was a harbinger of Western corruption, "ushering in a wretched culture."[13] Meanwhile, Canadian newspapers referred to "Hindu zealots," and the *Ottawa Citizen* published an op-ed piece by Indian journalist Ranjan Gupta under the title, "Coming Out of the Closet: A Controversial Film is Forcing Indians to Confront Female Sexuality." Gupta states, "Ultimately, I think the film *Fire* is out of place in India. We are talking about lesbianism in a country with a system of arranged marriages. Where is its place in a conservative society? In the closet, I think, where it has remained so far."[14] This kind of reaction to *Fire*'s representation of lesbianism, as if it were an alien concept that had never existed in India before, reinforced both in India and abroad the idea that a traditional culture can somehow remain static and unchanging.

The perpetuation of an unchanged tradition, which sometimes leads to selective editing of history, is certainly nothing new for India. In the time before Partition, as India attempted to prove itself as a viably independent country, a great deal of emphasis was placed on Hinduism's ancient traditions, the purity of its values, and its cultural uniqueness.[15] Hindu nationalist patriotism was heavily imbricated with mother/wife imagery. A large part of the nationalist gender project was the maintenance of the *pativrata* ideal, to counteract the Western presumption of sexual promiscuity and polygamy in 'primitive' societies. Women were, for example, prevented from participating in some formerly traditional kinds of worship, such as that of the goddess Kali, because such devotions appeared to be contradictory to the feminine ideal.[16] India itself became metaphorized as a woman, even to the point of the invention of a new goddess, Bharat Mata, or "Mother India".[17] Partha Chatterjee describes this nationalist construction of gender relations in terms of correlation between the space of the home and the feminine:

> [T]he crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality . . . they must not, in other words, become *essentially* westernized. (243)

The conjoined symbolism of the pure home and the virtuous woman became central to the conceptualization of Hindu national identity. At the same time as nationalism suppressed the 'primitive' sexuality of old traditions, it guarded against the infiltration of Western sexual values.

Reflecting these themes, the scenes of lesbian interaction throughout the film are, like the scene at the mosque, carefully staged for symbolic effect. The first intimate moments between the women happen on the roof of the family home, where the women traditionally hang their saris to dry. Because this space is used mainly for household work, it is almost exclusively the territory of women. It is only in this liminal space, not inside the house and yet not out in the world, that the two women have an opportunity to be alone. Here they are not under the roof of their husbands, and not confined by domestic walls; they can watch the world go by but can not be seen themselves.

The climactic scene, in which Ashok catches the two women making love, takes place in Radha and Ashok's marital bedroom. The bedroom, which is softly lit and draped in the soft white fabric of sheets and mosquito netting, contains two single beds. When Ashok finds it necessary to test his self-control against his sexual desire, he asks Radha to sleep beside him; otherwise, the couple sleep separately. Radha contravenes the traditional idea of the sanctity of the marital bedroom by bringing Sita into her bed, which has always been a place of solitude and loneliness for her. Her bed becomes the site of sexual pleasure, in contrast with the sterile emptiness of her husband's bed. Here Mehta illustrates the women's defiance of the *pativrata* ideal, and comments on the association of wifehood and motherhood with Hindu nationalism by juxtaposing the lesbian relationship with a marriage which is celibate because of Radha's infertility. Though by caring for her mother-in-law, faithfully performing religious rituals, and dutifully obeying her husband, Radha has fulfilled *pativrata* ideals, in her infertility she is unable to perform the role of mother, nurturer of tradition. While the traditional heterosexual relationship here is both literally and symbolically unable to reproduce and

perpetuate itself and therefore at a dead end, the lesbian relationship moves forward through the nurturing of freedom and pleasure.

Filmic Gaze/Colonial Gaze

The violation of tradition constituted by a lesbian relationship between traditional Hindu women upsets nationalist identification with a feminine icon constructed out of patriotism. But *Fire* reminds its audience that its portrayal of the contravention of tradition is not new. These traditions have often already been infiltrated by both Western and indigenous culture and ideology, and the film's iteration of this suggests that while lesbianism may be a central trope, it is also symbolically representative of this fact. Lesbianism, like many other themes which appear in *Fire*, is neither new nor revolutionary: it signifies the inability to maintain a static and immobile tradition.

Jatin, Sita's husband, runs a video store. When some school children come into the store asking for *Basic Instinct*, a Hollywood film famous for its explicit bisexual and lesbian scenes, he offers them instead a videotape of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, an American band notorious for their onstage nudity. This might be read as a canny and self-reflexive comment from Mehta on the sexual provocativeness of her film. Clearly, in comparison to either of these Californian productions, *Fire* is by far the least licentious, yet these pop culture commodities are readily available, and uncensored, in India. Jatin himself, when Sita asks him what kind of movies he likes, says he likes Kung-fu movies, imported from Hong-Kong. Jatin's lover, Julie, a Chinese woman raised in India, says that she learned to speak with an American accent in six months after

watching Hollywood movies; this, she says, will get her a job in the Hong Kong film industry.

These examples of cultural mixing are not just the aftermath of colonialism, but are also the result of the increasing presence of North American and European media in contemporary India, where satellite television brings MTV Asia and a host of American sit-coms into millions of family homes. This is globalization at work; but the presence of such media does not point only to a postcolonial merging of cultures, but rather to the complex imbrication of layers of cultural signs as these cultural productions become indigenized into the dominant local cultural ideology. Julie, who is a hair-dresser, and Jatin both desire a role in Hollywood culture, one of the major forces of cultural globalization. Julie seems fully aware of her potential for success in the global cultural economy; she has already taken steps to make herself a marketable commodity. As the marketplace for cultural commodities like sexual titillation and rock and roll, Jatin's video shop is an important cog in that global machinery.

Jatin does not seem to be terribly interested in Bollywood cinema, though Sita adores the romance and drama of it, even joking about running away to Bombay. The drag performance staged by Radha and Sita reinvents a typical Bollywood scene. Drag performance in India has a long and fascinating history in both traditional and popular culture.[18] The film alludes to this with the Kathak performance of the Ramayana, as this theatrical dance form is traditionally performed only by men who play both male and female roles. In Radha and Sita's play, the traditional and religious aspects of this version of drag are subverted by its lesbian context, and the scene self-consciously evokes the heterosexual romance of Bollywood.

Perhaps the best example of the intersections of the film's gaze with cultural and sexual commodification is that of the servant Mundu. Mundu has developed a routine of borrowing pornographic videos from Jatin's store when the family is otherwise occupied. While he is meant to be caring for Biji, Mundu views and masturbates to these tapes in full view of the mute old woman who is unable to do anything except ring her bell. When Radha catches him, he explains that this is a harmless activity, that it is simply relaxation, and that a man is helpless when such things are so close by. Radha is infuriated, and insists that Mundu leave. Mundu retaliates by suggesting that certain salacious details about his mistresses' activities will become known to their husbands if Radha does not keep this to herself. He tells Radha that his transgression is no different than hers. It is clear that Mundu perceives what he has understood of Radha and Sita's relationship as essentially pornographic. His knowledge about sexuality comes from a mixture of Bollywood-Hollywood images. A film like *Basic Instinct* confirms the idea of lesbianism as pornography, while the imagery of Hindi films normalize heterosexual desire.

Mundu's gaze reproduces the pornographic eye, which understands women's bodies and sexual relationships as consumable commodities. He understands Radha's actions through this objectifying gaze. Radha, however, has no such belief about her relationship with Sita, because she has no framework within which to define it. As she tells Sita, there is no word in their language to describe them. Mundu's and Radha's differing perspectives on female sexuality are highly influenced by their access to differing cultural paradigms. In this contrast, the impact of globalizing culture is undeniable, at least at the level of popular culture. To suggest, as Shiv Sena does, that

India is innocently traditional and unaware of lesbianism, or even pornography, is to imagine that India exists in isolation, which Mehta shows here to be untrue.

This is also evident in the film's references to the global rhetoric of multiculturalism. The point is most poignantly made by the Julie's father, who talks of the racism he has experienced as a Chinese man living in India. Indians, he says, are uncivilized, and he wants nothing more than to go home. In this scene, largely overlooked by critics, Mehta explodes the binary oppositions of cultural judgements made by Indians and Canadians alike, exposing a much more complex history of cultural crossings, hybrid identities, and the politics of ethnicity. It is a reminder that the politics of multiculturalism exist not only in the official policies of the Canadian government, for example, but also in the places that Western critics tend to think of only as points of origin for the Other. It is also interesting to note that those opposed to the film demanded that this scene, in which Julie's father utters the line "bloody Indians," be cut before the film was shown.[19]

Fire exposes many kinds of border crossings, sexual and cultural, ranging from Jatin's interracial relationship, to Sita and Radha's lesbian one, to the servant Mundu's viewing of pornography under the guise of religious drama. The relationships between characters in the film are all based around the notion of desire as forbidden, yet uncontrollable. In this way Mehta seems to frame the real agenda of the film: not to simply face off with tradition, but to question a traditionalism that is unable to accept its own changes and mutations. That Biji, the film's arbiter of tradition, is portrayed as mute is an interesting representation of that questioning. Throughout the film Biji is a powerful and daunting figure. She panoptically observes everything, and yet she is ultimately unable to express herself, or move. Instead, she must be constantly cared for and

nurtured. Mehta makes an ambivalent comment by representing tradition as all-seeing and all-powerful, and yet surviving only through the graces of those who actively maintain it. When those entrusted with that maintenance begin to question their role, the structure of tradition is open to transgression.

To borrow Bhabha's words, the film becomes an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). The hybridity of the film is not only constituted in the identity of its maker, or in the themes within it, but is also illustrated by the circumstances of its production.

Nationalism And The Production Of *Fire*

Mehta made the film with $1.6 million dollars, privately raised in Canada. Her partner, Canadian business maker David Hamilton, is one of the producers of the film. The crew consisted of members from Canada, India, and Europe. However, because she chose to employ a completely Indian cast for the project, the Canadian Radio, Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) refused to recognize the film as Canadian.[20] For Mehta, who is a Canadian citizen, this was a difficult pill to swallow. The decision left the film without an officially sanctioned cultural or national identity, despite its relevance to Indian and Canadian audiences.

Just as the CRTC refused to recognize the film, Indian officials were extremely reluctant to claim it for their own. Though the Indian Central Board of Film Certification (better known as the Censor Board) passed the film without censorship in the fall of 1998, pressure from the Shiv Sena party sent it back to be reviewed again, calling the

film an outrage, and an offense to Indian culture. The Censor Board has traditionally been lenient with English language, and particularly Hollywood, films, often passing them without any cuts to scenes of sex and violence. Mehta's film, made by an expatriate Indian, and set in India, seemed to be understood as a foreign film, though Canada refused to claim it. Identified in this way, it was much easier for the film's detractors to identify it not as an internally produced film about Indian realities, but as a foreign corruption of Indian culture.

One aspect of the film which seems to reinforce this notion is its use of language. Mehta wrote the script in English, though it is set in Hindi-speaking New Delhi. The difference, she says, is in the kind of English:

> In India, we do not speak pukka English. We've made the language our own. It's totally colloquial and has many phrases that are distinctly Indian. We call this happy amalgamation Hinglish . . . I thought about translating *Fire* into Hindi, but more for the Western audience rather than the Indian one. Western audiences find a 'foreign' film easier to imbibe, easier to accept in its cultural context, if it is in its indigenous language.[21]

Though Mehta intended to use English to speak to an Indian vernacular audience rather than a western one, it is this use of English that marks the film as foreign to Indian audiences. It is interesting to note that *Earth*, the second part of the trilogy, was written by Mehta in English based on *Cracking India*, a novel written in English by Bapsi Sidhwa. Mehta then had the script translated into Hindi, because she felt that the film's historical setting made that a more appropriate language. The middle class family at the centre of *Fire* is not unusual in its colloquial use of English, and this is set off by the

scripting of short interactions between servants in Hindi. Nonetheless, Mehta points out an important question of authenticity: that a Western audience expects to view the spectacle of the other in terms of signs of difference, and the accessibility of language for that audience makes the film as much an uncanny representation of itself, as much as an exotic vision of the Other. It is perhaps this aspect of the film that makes it easy for Canadian reviewers to identify it as Canadian. At the same time, the use of English allows an Indian audience to position the film outside the Indian national identity. In this context, it is language itself that becomes the centre of the film's hybrid intersections.

As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, "inauthenticity is condemned as a loss of origins and a whitening (or faking) of non-Western values" (Trinh 89). In the aftermath of the film's release, Mehta found her authenticity as an Indian brought into question by her Canadian location. Peter Birnie of the *Vancouver Sun* writes:

> From its first scene at the Taj Mahal, *Fire* is so awash in gender politics and an entirely Canadian mind-set that it can't possibly meet the director's lofty goal of creating a modern Indian fable . . . As an Indo-Canadian, Mehta is more than entitled to return to her birthplace and make statements. To her credit, *Fire* is a thoroughly professional production. But while the film starts out as an accurate and interesting portrayal of life in a modern Delhi family, it's quickly consumed by Mehta's feminist motives. [22]

This review explicitly reveals several problematic issues which are present even in more positive reviews and criticism of the film. Birnie clearly identifies feminism, and gender politics, with Western, Canadian culture to the extent that it is impossible for him to

imagine an India generating such movements. The film did in fact set off a wave of feminist and lesbian rights activism, but *Fire* provided fuel to movements which were already at work on issues specific to the Indian context. Birnie then assigns himself the power to judge the accuracy of Mehta's family portrait, which associates with traditionalism. Finally, he gives Mehta permission to go "home," to revisit her birth place, assigning her a hyphenated identity sanctioned by the Canadian multicultural policy which identifies her as a diasporic person, a homeless subject belonging to neither part of that identity. He accuses *Fire* of an "entirely Canadian mind-set," a suggestion that, while Mehta may have permission to return to India, she does not have the license to take her adopted culture with her.

As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue, hybridity is "dynamic, mobile, less an achieved synthesis or prescribed formula than an unstable constellation of discourses" (Stam/Shohat 42). But they also point out that hybridity is cooptable, that discourses of multiculturalism can deploy hybridity through, for example, hyphenated identities, in ways which obscure political and ideological hegemonies.

Hybridity And Postcoloniality As Cultural Commodities

What are the differences in the trajectories of the terms hybrid and postcolonial? As noted above, Mehta has used both terms in relation to her experience and productions. To begin with, it is necessary to understand the term postcolonial is intrinsically related to nationalism. Postcolonialism describes a national state of being in the time after an anti-colonial independence struggle. This is a highly useful term in this context, allowing a specific study of cultural productions arising from anti-oppression struggles. It brings

with it the push toward homogeneity of ethnicity and cultural identity that nationalist movements rely upon for strength. Frederic Jameson's argument regarding postcolonial literature as national allegory is a prime example of the connection between the two. The postcolonial, then, becomes a metonym for the newly independent "third-world" national identity.

Secondly, by situating itself in a historical moment that hinges upon colonial occupation, postcolonialism limits its scope; cultural productions prior to or during colonialism are rendered unnameable, or potentially inconsequential. Or, in other circumstances, these other moments in history are conflated with colonialism. Postcolonialism becomes a retroactive identification, so that in contemporary studies in literature the 'postcolonial' is frequently synonymous with "world literature" throughout time.

Mehta uses the term in its most literal sense: to describe at once the experience of growing up in a country that had recently gained its independence from a colonial oppressor, and the strange meldings of cultures and histories associated with that colonial entanglement. Though news media coverage of *Fire* did not necessarily use this term, reviews like Peter Birnie's, fraught with the notion of the native's return, evoke the paradigm of postcoloniality.

The assumption of the native's return to the motherland suggests that 'home' is a static, stable place, where the disenfranchised diasporic person can return to experience her culture authentically. Postcolonialism posits the danger of producing a national culture, defined by its oppression, which is historically collapsed. This kind of cultural identity is static; it presumes that culture is definable, quantifiable, claimable. It becomes

possible to authentically represent one's nation; to speak for it, or to re/produce it. Thus Salman Rushdie or Anita Desai become representatives of Indian postcolonial literature, and North American restaurant reviews grade ethnic food by virtue of its authenticity. The specific meaning of postcolonialism in relation to nationalism becomes lost to a general category which identifies the Other in the global village.

In this version of postcolonialism, as Rey Chow and bell hooks have argued, authenticity becomes integral to the definition of value. *Fire* fails the test of authenticity: its maker speaks from a position she designates as hybrid; both North American and Indian audiences were unable to interpret the film as genuinely Indian. It may be a postcolonial cultural production in the sense that Mehta is herself a product of colonialism, or in that it describes an India struggling in the cultural aftermath of colonialism, but the difficulty of audiences and critics with the film seems to lie in its uneasy relationship with cultural authenticity.

If postcolonialism has limited effectiveness in the analysis of a production like *Fire*, the concept of hybridity offers the possibility of a more fluid and dynamic identification. Hybridity, as it has been fleshed out in the work of Bhabha and Rey Chow, among others, provides a discourse for the interpretation of cultural productions which cannot be understood in the postcolonial model of authenticity. Hybrid productions may be postcolonial; they may be the work of diasporic people; or they may be cross-cultural collaborations—all of which are the case with *Fire*. Hybridity is not fixed in a particular historical period, like the postcolonial, and therefore can exist in multiple times and spaces.

Hybridity evokes the possibility of motion across borders, and opens up Bhabha's "third space" where cultural texts and histories can intersect. It can also, as Stam and Shohat note, veil uneven relations of power, equating for example, emigration with exile (43). Spivak warns that the hybrid "inadvertently legitimizes the 'pure' by reversal" (Spivak 1999, 65). The flexibility of the term hybridity runs the risk of losing the political immediacy of the postcolonial. Hybrid productions become therefore especially valuable in the cultural political economy. They signify "multicultural" value in the global market, and may be dislocated from their political origins. To acknowledge this difference opens up new questions in the case of *Fire*. To what degree does the ambiguity of hybridity allow *Fire* to simultaneously subvert a cultural paradigm that demands authenticity of difference and owes its existence and success to a politico-economic system that re/produces hybridity as a valuable commodity?

In its first run, *Fire* ran in repertory and art-house theatres. This kind of distribution indicates the assumption of an audience dominated by the North American arts community, and the suggestion that such a film would not do well in major markets. Following the onslaught of riots at releases in India, a spokesperson for Behaviour Distribution, which marketed the film, announced plans to open the film in every Canadian city. *Fire* gained even more success in India, as feminist and arts activists waged counter-campaigns against the Shiv Sena riots. Shabana Azmi, who plays Radha in the film, is a well-known feminist activist and member of the Indian Parliament: as a spokesperson for the film, she led candle-light vigils and debated with Shiv Sena leaders, defending the film's artistic merit, social value, and relevance to Indian women.

The attention garnered by the film brought it even more success in Canada and in India. Where it was previously difficult for Canadians to understand the film as authentically Canadian, and for Indians as representative of Indian culture, it became, by virtue of controversy, an authentic representation of the radical. Critics and audiences were unsure what to do with the film as an ethnocultural artifact: it does not have Canadian Content, and its representation of India seemed inauthentic to Indians.[23] As a cross-cultural lesbian film, it gains a single identity that, while not necessarily palatable to all its audiences, allows them to position themselves in relation to it.

It is cultural hybridity which allows the film to take on this position. Had the film been set in Canada, as Mehta and her critics have pointed out, it would not have ruffled as many feathers. It would likely have been received as a politically radical film about a lesbian relationship, and have been lauded by the Canadian artistic and activist communities. Had it been an Indian production, it would have been an *Indian* movie, written in Hindi, about a lesbian relationship, the controversy would have been paid little attention to in Western media. The appeal of the film for Western audiences would have lain in the exotic ethnicity of the film.

Postcolonial and hybrid identities become commodified in different ways in a cultural industry which searches for authenticity in order to define value. *Fire* did not receive a great deal of attention from film critics or public audiences until it gained a spotlight in the news media. Having proven its ability to authentically locate itself in different ways as a postcolonial production, and as a hybrid entity, the film achieved a kind of exchange-value that was previously denied it for the same reasons. Once the

media were able to convert hybridity from something disquieting and disturbing to cultural hegemony into an authentic radicalism, the film gained a much wider appeal.

When a commodity is not definable within cultural boundaries which map onto geographic-political ones, it is undesirable because of the discomfort produced by lack of identification. When it becomes locatable within a cultural body, it takes on a series of associations which allow audiences access to it. *Fire* exists in all three of these spaces. As a hybrid production, it continues to occupy a political space which belongs to none of the cultures which contribute to its mixture, and yet it belongs within all.

That such a film may be simultaneously economically and culturally successful, and yet maintain its quality of disturbance presents a difficult dynamic. Is the film robbed of its efficacy when it becomes desirable as a cultural commodity? In the next chapter, I will examine in further detail the workings of the political economic machine which produce the circumstances for this process.

NOTES: Chapter 1

[1] Zeitgeist Films Website, "Reaction to the Film in India." http://www.zeitgeistfilm.com/current/fire/ fireindianreaction.html.

[2] Bruce Kirkland. "Sects and Violence in Mehta's Cinema; Toronto International Film Festival." *Toronto Sun*, September 11, 1998, Final Edition, p. 64.

[3] Judy Gerstel. "Canadian Filmmaker in Her Element." *Toronto Star*, Sept. 18, 1998, Final Edition, p. C1.

[4] *Water*, the third film in the trilogy, will be set in India in the 1920's. Production on *Water* began in early 2000, but continued rioting and opposition to the film has interrupted production.

[5] Kathleen Wilkinson. "Filmmaker Deepa Mehta is on fire." *Lesbian News*, September 1997 23. 2, 38-40.

[6] Peter Birnie. "Fire and A Thousand Acres Misguided in their Male-Bashing." *Vancouver Sun*, September 19, 1997, Final Edition, C7.

[7] Zeitgeist Films Website, "Director's Statement." http://www.zeitgeistfilm.com/current/fire/ firedeepaonfilm.html.

[8] See David Kinsley, "Sita" in *Hindu Goddesses*, 70-80.

[9] The term communalism refers to the social and political conflict between Hindu and Muslim religious communities.

[10] "If Only Lesbians had been Muslim." *National Post*, Dec. 15, 1998 B8

[11] Haroun Siddiqui, "National Peace through Poetry." *Toronto Star*, Feb. 28, 1999, Final Edition, A13.

[12] Muslims living in India live under Muslim religious law, which is the state law of Pakistan. In some areas, such as marital relationships, Muslim law conflicts with the secular law, which generally reflects Hindu values and much of which is based on British legal codes. An feminist account of some of the effects of the law can be found in "Shabhano," by Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992.

[13] *National Post*, Dec. 15, 1998 B8

[14] Ranjan Gupta, *Ottawa Citizen*, December 29, 1998, Final Edition A17.

[15] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question." *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Eds. KumKum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 233-253.

[16] See Sumantha Bannerjee, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in 19th Century Bengal." *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Eds. KumKum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 127-179.

[17] Lise McKean, "Bharat Mata" in *Devi and the Goddesses of India* 251-280.

[18] An interesting example of drag in popular culture can be found in hijra performance. Hijras are male transvestites, and do not identify as homosexual. They often stage singing and dancing performances in the street for money. In contemporary India, hijras are the object of fear and fascination. Geeta Patel's article "Home, Homo, Hybrid" (*College*

Literature, February 1997, 24:1, 133-50) provides a fascinating discussion of hijra performance and hybridity.

[19] "Indians protest Canadian Movie," *Edmonton Journal*, Dec. 19 1997, Final Edition E12.

[20] Dipti Chakravorty, "Playing With Fire: Director received death threats for controversial movie."

Calgary Herald, August 7, 1997, Final Edition, p.E1

[21] from Zeitgeist Films website, "Why Fire is in English."

http://www.zeitgeistfilm.com/current/fire/ fireindianreaction.html

[22] Peter Birnie, *Vancouver Sun,* September 19, 1997.

[23] I use the term "Canadian content" here in two senses. *Fire* does not refer to Canada or Canadian culture in any way that I was able to note. The film's Canadianness is not immediately apparent. I also use the term in reference to the CRTC's refusal to recognize the film as Canadian (see note 14), for the reason that I have just mentioned, and as well because none of the actors are Canadian. The CRTC provides guidelines for Canadian broadcasters regarding appropriate levels of "Canadian content." Films, television programs, musical acts and other productions for broadcast are deemed Canadian by virtue of Canadian participation in the production.

Boundaries On Fire: Hybridity And The Political Economy Of Culture

Chapter Two

In the previous chapter, I examined some of the ways in which the ideas of postcolonialism and hybridity can be useful as concepts with which to talk about cross-cultural productions, and detrimental as tools for the commodification of depoliticized ethnicity and the development of a universalizing cultural globalization. These processes are strongly rooted in the idea of the authentic representation of national cultural identity. In this chapter, I want to expand this framework to explore these concepts in relation to transnational industry, and the relationship of hybridity to the perceived processes of globalization.

The music industry is for many reasons a good example of globalization and of the structure of cultural political economy, both in terms of the financial implications of transnational corporatization and of the commodification of culture and ethnicity. To flesh out my argument, I want to turn to a specific cultural production which, like *Fire,* expresses as much through the circumstances of its production as in its content. *Star Rise*, released in 1997 by Real World Records, is an album of re-mixes of traditional Qawwali devotional songs performed by the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. The songs are re-mixed by musicians and djs who constitute the United Kingdom's Asian Underground: a group of young, predominantly male, British people of South Asian descent. The album was produced by Michael Brook, a Canadian, and released on British label Real World Records.

I argue that an album like *Star Rise* expresses the tension and conflict of hybridity, the lived experiences of racism, alienation, and nostalgia for first- and second-generation immigrant youth, as well as an attempt to express the disjunctive formation of an identity that exists between colonizer and colonized. However, the political economy in which the music industry operates serves to disengage that radicalization and posits, instead, such hybridity as an authentic representation of a new Other produced by globalization, suitable for consumers in the West who may comfortably situate themselves as part of that global identity. This use of hybridity supports the notion of universal globalization, collapsing the politics of difference in favour of the notion of a globally shared cultural language. Transnational industry benefits from this by producing an artifically united world market share in which cultural commodities celebrated for their difference become signifiers of a shrinking and assimilating world.

Star Rise and the Asian Underground

To open up an argument about the hybrid politics of *Star Rise*, it is necessary to first examine the concept of the Asian Underground. In the mid to late 1980's, South Asian youth in the United Kingdom dealt with a series of constraints on the development of their own sense of identity and community. Most were first- and second- generation immigrants, with strong ties to homelands in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka maintained by their parents and their communities. These young people often dealt with overt racist confrontations, particularly in cities like Birmingham and London. They were, and still are sometimes, called Black—the terminology generally used in the UK for all people of African, Caribbean, South Asian, or Middle Eastern descent.

The conflation of these communities is not accidental. As Paul Gilroy notes, "British racism has generated turbulent economic, ideological, and political forces that have seemed to act upon the people they oppressed by concentrating their cultural identities into a single powerful configuration" (86). Black as a categorical term had both positive and negative effects: as an identity around which to organize anti-racist projects, Blackness provided a sense of continuity, unity and a political position in direct opposition to the construction of normalized Anglo-Saxon whiteness. On the other hand, the essentialization and homogenization of diverse ethnicities, particularly of peoples from former colonies, seemed also to perpetuate the popular sense of colour as Other in the United Kingdom:"[immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean] also became 'Black' in Britain, an identity that they generally do not have in their home countries, but which becomes salient to them in England as a consequence of racism directed at them from outside their communities as well as from its utility to them as a device for building unity within and across aggrieved populations" (Lipsitz 126).

In the mid to late 1980's, young South Asians in the UK organized around the concept of Blackness in many ways, and found the sense of community engendered by it useful. They tended to listen to reggae and hip-hop music, the musics of the Black community:

> In reinventing their own ethnicity, some of Britain's Asian settlers have also borrowed the sound system culture of the Caribbean and the soul and hip-hop styles of Black America, as well as techniques like mixing, scratching, and sampling as part of their invention of a new mode of cultural production with an identity to match. (Gilroy 82)

This "invention" of a new cultural identity coincided with the growing popularity of 'day-timer' clubs. These clubs played Bhangra, a kind of dance music popularized around the mid 80's that drew heavily on traditional Punjabi music, mixed in with hip-hop and reggae sounds. They were open during the day, in part because many South Asian girls were simply not allowed to go out at night. Sanjay Sharma suggests that Bhangra and its related dance music

> enable[d] Asian youth to articulate and deploy a sense of 'Asianness' that is not necessarily in opposition to notions of being Black, and, though more problematically, even British. These dance musics may, then, act as a site for the translation between diasporic Asian, Black, and British identifications. (39)

The Bhangra music scene, which was foundational for many Asian Underground musicians, is thus one of the key places that such "Asian" identity began to emerge.

This new category of identity embraces people of South Asian descent from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, as well as in some cases diasporic South Asians from the Caribbean. It offers an alternative to the term 'Black', which racially homogenizes British people of colour, and therefore leaves Blackness open to exploration and development within the African diasporic community in the United Kingdom. It does, however, contain contradictions similar to those of the previous category of the British Black, in that it both offers the semblance of unity among diverse communities and creates a danger of ethnic homogenization. Asianness, particularly as it is expressed in Bhangra culture, both reinforces and reaches across the boundaries produced by the authentic postcolonial nationalist identities of South Asian countries. For example, while

both Indian Bengalis and Bangladeshis are Asian and speak the same language, allegiance to the specific national homeland of each remains important to a sense of identity within the category Asian. Thus, while Asianness serves a purpose in addressing the homogenization of the term Black, it also reproduces some of its problematic features. The central difference seems to be that, while Blackness for Asians seemed to be organized around the idea of racial solidarity, Asianness is defined by ethnic and cultural authenticity. In Gilroy's words, "this retreat from a politically constructed notion of solidarity has initiated a compensatory recovery of narrowly ethnic culture and identity" (86). This shift allows UK South Asians to explore issues of diaspora and racism in ways that are not always based on binary white/non-white race relations, as well as providing a racial and ethnic identity-position from which to address racism.

As Asian identity was developing in and around Bhangra clubs and anti-racist organizing in the late 1980's and early 1990's, South Asian musicians influenced by hip-hop, reggae, and the burgeoning electronic dance music scene were experimenting with the sounds of trip-hop, electronic music and drum 'n' bass, musical styles which rely heavily on sampling and electronic instrumentation. The result is a fairly musically diverse group of performers who are now called the Asian Underground. This term, which appears first in the mid 1990's developed from within the musical community, and has since been employed by record company marketing strategists and music journalists.[1] Its incorporation of the word Underground locates the music, and the resulting sense of community, in a political space that is subversive, outside and exterior to the UK mainstream, and outside the South Asian mainstream as well. The Asian Underground is not Brit-pop, nor is it British dance music, nor does it fit easily into any musical tradition

originating in South Asia, be it classical or *filmi* (Bollywood soundtrack) music. The strong anti-racist politics associated with the Asian Underground, which I will explore in more detail later on, also aligns it with the more political evocations of Underground in the sense of radical activism.

It may seem somewhat paradoxical, then, that the word Asian in Asian Underground represents a collective identity-building which is strongly rooted in authenticity and nationalist cultural identity. Referring to Hip-Hop oriented Asian Underground performers Asian Dub Foundation and Fun^Da^Mental, Sanjay Sharma argues that Asian in this context constitutes a kind of strategic essentialism (invoking Spivak), or a strategic identity politics:

> These groups' Rap music is a contradictory site (in common with some other Asian popular cultural forms), which offers the possibility of simultaneously invoking/affirming/decentring a politicized category of 'Asian' or its particular ethnicities in a racist British social formation. (43).

The word Asian in Asian Underground comes to signify the very real need to organize and develop ethnocultural identity as a response and resistance to racist culture, while Underground invokes the image of radical politics and the idea of a 'difference with agency,' difference self-consciously and deliberately claimed. In this sense, the Asian Underground suggests an identity which simultaneously affirms and establishes a strategic communal identity, and decentres and destabilizes racist and essentialist notions of ethnicities and national cultures. This contradictory identity may be usefully interpreted as a hybrid one.

In both a musical aesthetic sense and an ethnocultural political sense, the Asian Underground presents a kind of hybridity which is extremely conscious of the contradictions of inhabiting a space between colonizer and colonized, homeland and foreign. It self-consciously brings forth a plural, multi-faceted identity-formation that incorporates into itself the influences of other diasporic and postcolonial cultures, and experiences of racism and the struggle for identity and community.

Asian Underground musical acts, which are often explicitly political and anti-racist in their lyrics, draw on hip-hop, drum n' bass, reggae, techno, and many different kinds of traditional and contemporary South Asian music.[2] They are musically representative of the many cross-cultural influences available in the multi-ethnic UK, but those influences are deployed strategically: the key element identifying Asian Underground acts is the persistent presence of samples, lyrics, instruments, and melodies of South Asian origin, incorporated into Western popular musical styles.

Much of this music relies on electronic music production and dj mix culture, and encounters many of the issues that are prevalent in other areas of electronic and hip-hop music: the use of samples, for example, constitutes a large part of the composition in these genres.[3] Samples are like quotations taken from another song, although in these genres of music they are not often explicitly credited. In some songs, a single sample forms the central musical theme, while other songs are a kind of pastiche arrangement of many samples. Sometimes, as is the case in some tracks on *Star Rise*, large portions of a song are cut up, modified and rearranged. As of the end of the nineteen-nineties, the convention has been for artists using sampling to credit the originator of the sample on the recording. In cases where the origin of the sample is obscure, or where copyright

regulations are vague, the original performers of such samples are not acknowledged at all. Asian Underground recordings are often quite specific about the crediting of samples. Because samples of South Asian origin are so central to the composition of Asian Underground tracks, and because they are deployed very specifically as anchors to a national cultural heritage as well as markers of a hybrid identity, the naming of those origins is a necessary part of the political project of the music. Naming is also a convention in reggae culture, which is one of the major influences on the Asian Underground's musical style. For example, in the acknowledgements of his book *Cut n' Mix*, Dick Hebdige employs this convention himself, remarking, "Naming can be in and of itself an act of invocation, conferring power and/or grace upon the namer: the names can carry power in themselves" (8). By naming the originators of thoughts, in the case of Hebdige and academic writers in general, or originators of music in the case of musicians who employ sampling, producers locate their work within a specific history and ancestry.

Another important feature of reggae which is influential on Asian Underground music is the idea of 'dub': editing, re-mixing, and 'versioning' tracks. Dub reggae, which began with Jamaican producer King Tubby in the early 1960's, usually involves adding and removing tracks on a recording, changing bass and treble levels and adding effects and other instruments. 'Versioning' refers to a reggae convention in which artists take the instrumental version of a track, modify it slightly, and add new vocals and lyrics.[4] These kinds of manipulation of recordings have led to the concept of the re-mix, where different versions of the same track are developed, creating new sounds out of existing ones: "the components of one mix separated and broken down can be more easily borrowed and blended to create further permutations of meaning" (Gilroy 106). Hip-hop, which also

employs these conventions, has roots in the reggae sounds which are also an influence on Asian Underground music. Versioning and re-mixing make it difficult to ascertain who is the original author or producer of a track, and, as Gilroy notes, blur the relations of production and consumption around a cultural commodity, a point to which I will return later.

The techniques of editing and re-mixing in particular are foundational to the production of *Star Rise*. The album consists of re-mixes by Asian Underground artists of songs by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Khan, who died in 1997 just before the album was completed, was one of the most well-known of South Asia's Qawwali singers. Qawwals are Islamic devotional songs, noted for their passionate Urdu lyrics and melodies. They are traditionally sung only by men, and usually in a call-and-response style: a lead singer will sing a line, and a chorus will repeat it afterward or simultaneously, or repeat particular lines in the background.[5] The instrumentation usually consists of harmonium, tabla, cymbals, and various other instruments traditional to Northern India and Pakistan.

Khan made a career in Pakistan and India as one of the most gifted contemporary performers of this style of music. In the 1980's he began to explore collaborative projects with musicians in the UK and the United States, to the disapproval of some Pakistani critics at home and abroad. These critics felt that by participating in these collaborations, he was corrupting the sacred nature of the music. Projects on soundtrack and album work with musicians like Ry Cooder, Eddie Vedder and Peter Gabriel made Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan known in Western popular music circles as well as in South Asia.

It is his work with Peter Gabriel that has been most influential on Nusrat's career in the West. Gabriel, whose interest in 'world music,' a term which I will explore later

on this chapter, founded Womad (World Of Music, Arts and Dance) in the early 80's and later founded Real World Records. The label, in conjunction with Womad, seeks to expand the audience for traditional and contemporary music from cultures around the world. To accomplish this, Real World invites artists like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to use its high-tech studios and large budgets to produce high-quality recordings distributed for sale in many parts of the world.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan released several albums on the Real World Records label. *Star Rise* was released in 1997 on the same label, just after his death.[6] The album draws on music from two earlier albums recorded by Khan, *Night Song* (1996) and *Mustt Mustt* (1990), released and published by Real World.[7] These tracks are collaborative efforts with Canadian producer Michael Brook, who co-wrote some of the tracks and produced all of them. Thus album's artist accreditation actually reads "Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Michael Brook: Re-mixed." These songs are re-mixed by Asian Underground musicians Talvin Singh, Aki Nawaz, and Nitin Sawhney, and groups Joi, Asian Dub Foundation, State of Bengal, Black Star Liner, Earthtribe, Dhol Foundation and Fun^Da^Mental. These artists come variously from Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds, and from Hindu, Sikh and Muslim backgrounds. All of these groups have names which identify them within the Asian Diaspora, with the exception of Black Star Liner, which is named for Rastafarian prophet Marcus Garvey's dream of ships which would take Jamaican Blacks 'back' to Africa; Fun^Da^Mental, a group of which Aki Nawaz is a founding member; and Joi, whose name comes from the Joi Bangla Bengali movement of Southall in the late '80s. Many of them have been making similar music since the early 1990's, and are considered central figures in the Asian Underground.

The track listing on the album shows the names of the artists in bold type, followed by the original titles of the Nusrat/Brook songs; tiny type below it identifies the albums from which these tracks are taken. This foregrounds the "new stars," so that while the spine of the album names only Michael Brook and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the importance of the re-mix aspect of the tracks is highlighted.

Authenticity, Hybridity and Music Production

On the back of the album, a line beneath the title reads "From the Asian Underground the new stars emerge to interpret the greatest singer of Qawwali music." This statement suggests a kind of lineage positing Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan as an ethnocultural ancestor, and locates the Asian Underground within a heritage of South Asian music. Though not all the artists come from Islamic backgrounds, they consider Nusrat and Qawwali part of their cultural history, and attempt to explore this in the music. Inside the sleeve, liner notes contain statements from each artist, commenting about Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his importance to their own sense of musical history and identity for a variety of reasons. It becomes clear in these comments that Asian Undergrounders see Nusrat not just as an ethnocultural ancestor in terms of South Asian music and identity, but also as a foundation to their sense of the radical politics of hybrid identity and music.

Khan is credited as a master of traditional Qawwali: Talvin Singh calls him "the father figure of Sufi Qawwali music," while Asian Dub Foundation states that "Nusrat helped introduce Qawwali to many second generation British Asians." Other artists describe Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's impact on people around the world; Earthtribe for

example says, "We are glad that people like Nusrat have helped open the doors of the world to Eastern music." Clearly Nusrat is recognized as a key figure in world music, and for having expanded the West's interest in the music of South Asia.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's collaborations with Michael Brook and other Western musicians also locate him as an innovator in cross-cultural projects. Nitin Sawhney says in his statement that Khan's work with Brook "threw huge shadows over all previous attempts to bring credible east-west collaborations to the mainstream." Black Star Liner calls Khan the "reclining John Lee Hooker, Lennon, Elvis, Liam Gallagher, and Freddy Mercury of Asian music," while Joi calls him the "James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, and Miles Davis of Asian music." These comparisons align Nusrat with figures generally conceived as the fathers of blues, rock, jazz and funk, but they also constitute an attempt on the part of these artists to locate Nusrat within other musical traditions which they have grown up with, and in some cases may be more familiar with. This list of musicians and genres represents important movements in Black music, and also identifies white musicians who have excelled in what are already hybrid genres.[8]

In the most intriguing passage in the liner notes to *Star Rise,* Aki Nawaz of Fun^Da^Mental provides the following dialogue which I quote at length here:

> The scene: Aki pogoing to the Clash in his and the rest of the family's bedroom in Bradford in 1977.
> Dad: Oi, turn that rubbish off, it's crap!
> Aki: But dad it's punk, it's different, it's new, it breaks all the traditions of politics and music.
> Dad: Listen son, traditions have been broken for centuries in Asia. You should check out your musical heritage – there's people like Nusrat blah blah blah etc...
> Aki thinks: Old codger, me dad thinks he knows music. Asian music, what??? Sounds crap!
> 12 years later

> Aki thinks: Bloody 'ell, me dad was right. There's some amazin' stuff about.
> 3 years later
> Scene: Aki on the phone to Real World.
> Aki: Yeah, yeah, of course I'd love to remix Nusrat, it'd be an honour. FEE?? I'll do it for nowt, oh ok fine, I'll do it for that then.
> The rest is all about the past, manipulating it, exploiting it, and getting it heard.

In this passage, Nawaz identifies some key elements of Nusrat's relationship with the Asian Underground. He demonstrates that in the music culture he and many of his peers grew up with, punk, reggae, and later hip-hop were of greater interest than South Asian music. This may be the case because those musical forms had a more immediate political impact in terms of radicality and anti-racist protest.[9] The breaking of political and musical traditions is certainly part of Asian Dub Foundation and Fund^Da^Mental's project; their music fits as much into the history of anti-capitalism and anti-racism of 70's Punk as it does into a tradition of South Asian music.[10] But what is most illuminating about this passage is Aki's dad's suggestion that traditions are always being broken, and that South Asian history is not only about the maintenance of tradition, but about defying it as well. That he mentions Nusrat in this context is fascinating because it explicitly identifies the politically radical nature of the music, though other artists' comments are mostly about aesthetic concerns.

Asian Dub Foundation remarks in *Star Rise*'s liner notes on Qawwali music's "questioning, rebellious nature." Though Qawwali is part of a long spiritual tradition, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan himself, in collaborating as he did for many years with musicians in the West on projects that changed and modified Qawwali traditions, is in this sense a breaker of tradition.

The album *Mustt Mustt,* from which some of the songs re-mixed on *Star Rise* come, is an example of this. While some of the songs retain a traditional Qawwali feel, others incorporate Western instrumentation such as acoustic, electric and bass guitars and electronic instruments like drum machines and synthesizers. These elements, along with Brook's collaborative writing and production, make the music of *Mustt Mustt* quite different from the traditional Qawwali on which Khan built his career. In the liner notes, the description of the writing process appeals to what Ashwani Sharma calls an "essentializing hybridity," wherein "the nature of 'ethnic authenticity' is recomposed" (24). Brook's production of songs often called for the cutting of a phrase, or the splicing of vocal sections together. Although this interferes with the specific religious meaning of lyrics and melodic phrases, Real World's liner notes downplay this:

> A compromise was achieved – important lyrical phrases were restored without losing the musical structure Michael had developed. So a halfway point was reached between East and West in song writing, in performance, and in attitude.

Ashwani Sharma argues that this "sample of the elevation and erasure of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's Qawwali music suggests the contradictory ways particular cultural forms can be celebrated and authenticated as hybrid within the logic of difference in global commodity capitalism" (25). What is happening in the relationship between Khan and Real World is an effort to simultaneously point to ethnicity and then hybridity as the authenticators of Khan's work. While ethnicity is a marker of difference, hybridity points towards the development of global culture.

An example of this can be found in a key element of Real World packaging. Album art designs incorporate a coloured bar code-like design which appears on the back and the spine of the album. Each colour represents a different region of the world, and the names of the countries from which artists are from are indicated in those colour bars. *Mustt Mustt* indicates only Pakistan on its colour bar, despite the collaboration, writing and production efforts of Canadian Michael Brook. On *Star Rise*, however, Canada is identified (for Brook), as are India, Pakistan, and England. While in *Mustt Mustt* Real World locates Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan as a Pakistani musician, *Star Rise* emphasizes the multiculturalism of its collaborative effort. In this context, "multiculturalism looks suspiciously like a disguise of transnational corporatism" (Miyoshi 1996, 98). That such locations are named in this way points to the motivating force behind world music as an industry concept: authenticity of culture and location are integral to the production of hybridity as a fetishized commodity. To expand hybridity as a biological metaphor, one might say that while hybrids may occur in nature, if one wants to breed a species to enhance certain characteristics, one investigates the genetic heritage of its various ancestors. This is more or less what Real World does, providing a pedigree for the multiculturalism, and sense of 'global village,' that their artists seem to offer.

This pedigree of hybridity is what Ashwani Sharma refers to as contradictory. It relies on cultural and ethnic authenticity to prove its transcendence of cultural borders, and in doing so maintains and reinforces global cultural heterogeneity. At the same time, it plays into the theory that globalization will and should lead to cultural integration and universalization. Hybridity seems to simultaneously work for these two versions of globalization. In the first instance, it provides a way to talk about the tensions and

difficulties of living and working between cultures while reestablishing the fixity of culture, thus drawing out the push-and-pull between remaining loyal to one's ethnocultural heritage, and assimilating into a new culture which places strong demands on the Other. This is indeed a strategic kind of essentialism, whereby hybridity contradicts its own context. In order to be situated "in-between" cultures, there must be a set of cultural identity constructions stable enough to maintain the lines between them; yet hybridity also suggests that there is enough space between these identities in which to produce new ones. In the second instance, this in-between space becomes the location of multicultural universalism, and therefore the site of an enormous market for cultural commodities.

Hybridity, therefore, either posits a new kind of hyperlocality, or a local comprised of multiple diverse cultures and geographical locations, that defies the idea of global homogenization, or it plays into a "melting pot" kind of multiculturalist globalization that aspires to cultural universality. Music seems to be an apt vehicle for this: as a medium it is not necessarily dependent on language, and many, including Real World Records, argue that music is in fact a universal language. But the political significance of the specificity of local culture and tradition also makes music the site of difficult negotiations around difference. World music is one of the major sites within the music industry in which these contradictions are rehearsed.

World Music, WOMAD, and the Global Music Industry

World music is not a genre. It is essentially a marketing category into which record companies slot music that is not popular Western music, and is identifiably ethnic. The category therefore contains music from Africa, South and East Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and from indigenous people from all over the world. National and geographical origin is very often a deciding factor in this categorization: although hip-hop for example is Black music, it is only considered world music if it comes from somewhere other than North America. World music, which sometimes also referred to as "World Beat," is a category, however, which in practice behaves like a genre, appearing alongside terms like "rock," "jazz," or "folk." Ashwani Sharma refers to the introduction to the *Directory of World Music*, which tells a story of the origins of the term:

> One of the obstacles to persuading record shops to stock much of the new international product was reported to be the lack of an identifying category to describe it, record shop managers didn't know whether to call it 'ethnic', 'folk', 'international' or some other equivalent. After a great deal of discussion the term chosen was 'World Music', other contenders such as 'Tropical Music' being judged too narrow of scope.'[11]

Despite the possibility that music placed in this category may also fit into one or many other conventional music categories, it is immediately identified by its ethnocultural background, and its difference from other, Western contemporary music is clearly marked.

The first examples of the coining of the term world music are to be found in the performance of Ravi Shankar at Woodstock, and in the influence of Indian musical forms on music popular in that period. It is important to note that World Music does not identify

a new phenomenon: different kinds of Western music borrow from various ethnic musical styles. Rather, the term is an indication of a change in the market for music. Listeners in North America and Europe who were primarily consumers of Western pop became interested in the ethnically authentic musical origins of these new musical fusions, and record companies began to take note of this demand. Where previously these origins were obscured (Pat Boone and Elvis Presley recording music by Chuck Berry and Little Richard is an example of this), consumers increasingly demanded access to the real thing.

Womad and Real World Records are two of the most important organizations in World Music. Womad's web site proclaims: "we aim to excite, to inform, and to create awareness of the worth and potential of a multicultural society."[12] The group uses two related methods, festivals and recordings, to accomplish these goals. Womad festivals occur, for the most part, in Europe, North America, and Australia, and sometimes in parts of Pacific Asia. These festivals, about which John Hutnyk, writes at length in his essay "Adorno at Womad: South Asian Cross-Overs and the Limits of Hybridity-Talk," are "interesting as a site for the playing out of capitalist cultural production at both ideological and economic registers" (Hutnyk 1997, 107). The festivals typically bring together performers from diverse parts of the world, along with booths providing information about "world issues," stalls selling such cultural artifacts as jewelry, and handicrafts, as well as Womad merchandise.

The festivals are also one of the major places that potential recording artists are recruited. Real World Records is essentially the recording arm of Womad. The label has become the pre-eminent music publisher and promoter of World Music. It brings artists

like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to its UK studios, where they have access to technology and production values that are often not available or financially inaccessible in the developing countries from which the artists often hail. But Real World's biggest accomplishment, in association with Womad, is the distribution of World Music in the West, and the dissemination of the idea that music is the "universal language" of the global village:

> Before Real World, only with great determination, or a lot of travelling, was it possible to access music by artists working outside Western Europe and North America. Now, you can stroll into high street stores and find CDs of music from every continent, many of them bearing the Real World colour bar logo.[13]

Despite its location on the World Wide Web, where it can ostensibly be accessed by people all over the world, this statement is clearly directed at consumers in the West. Music buyers in Pakistan would not need to enter a high street shop in the United Kingdom in order to find recordings by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Though its intentions seem to be well-meaning, trumpeting the aesthetic value of "multicultural music," and decrying racism as "stupid" (from the Womad web site), it is apparent that Womad and Real World are less interested in Indian consumers having better access to music from China and Africa, for example, than for British and North American audiences to be able to purchase these items. This musical globalism, it seems, is centred on the West.

The world music that is produced by Womad and Real World is defined by cultural and ethnic authenticity. That authenticity is also linked to a kind of essentialist nationalism; the omnipresent colour bar of the Real World design roots each recording in a national identity. Thus, as Hutnyk remarks,

> Working for Real World can be no easy task for the A and R reps and design-wallahs, because of quite inconsistent and differing demarcations of the authentic, and the complications arising from having multiple 'national' musical traditions – so that the Bauls of Bengal occupy a genre which sits uneasily alongside Qawwali and UK Asian rap . . . Womad seems to maintain a form of nationalist cultural essentialism that must remain blind to the consistencies of its own designations. (1997, 111)

That Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the members of the Asian Underground share label space on Real World opens up a slew of questions about the real implications of world music as a category. Nusrat's work is marketed as "authentic," though his collaborative work, and indeed his very affiliation with the label, also identifies him and his work as hybrid. The Asian Underground, which consciously positions itself as politically hybrid, must be re-interpreted in terms of multicultural aesthetics, and distilled into national cultures (British, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) in order to be saleable as an authentic world music product. The "encounter with the West," whether it is expressed in production values and collaborations, or through the lived experience of diaspora, is seen as an enhancement of a pre-existing identity and tradition, and therefore an enhancement of the music. (Sharma A. 24).

The products of Womad and Real World meet the needs of music buyers who are literally consuming culture and ethnicity. The relationship between producer and consumer in the transnational music industry, however, is complex and fluid. It is quite clear that Real World and Womad perceive their market audience as one which is located in the West; but one of the largest markets for both Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the Asian

Underground's music is composed of South Asian diasporic people, for whom location in the West is frequently an uneasy terrain marked by assimilation, racism, and nationalist cultural nostalgia. It is worth examining the workings of the transnational music recording industry at this point, with a view to the relations of producer and consumer.

Transnational Recording Industry and Cultural Production as Labour

At the root of the category of world music is a music industry dominated by a handful of multinational corporations which control publishing rights, royalties, and copyrights for a majority of the music available on the global market.

At present, there are four transnational record companies controlling the majority of the world's music publishing and distribution rights: Universal Music Group, Time-Warner, BMG, and Sony. BMG is headquartered in Germany, Sony in Japan, and the other two in the US.[14] Each of these companies, referred to in the music industry as the Big Four, controls subsidiaries in other countries; the largest, Universal, has offices in 59 countries. These corporations are enormous conglomerations of other, smaller, companies, many of which have been bought and taken over by, or merged with these giants.

Very often these smaller companies, usually record labels, continue to exist in name, or as an "imprint," and handle music promotion, while the parent corporation controls the publishing and distribution. This system has been fairly lucrative for both large and small companies: through transnational corporations, small record labels have access to a vast global distribution system which they would not have the resources to implement themselves. Larger companies have a market advantage by essentially

controlling competition from these smaller companies, and the result is clearly profitable for the industry. To this end, even "independent" record labels (labels with no corporate affiliation) often sign distribution deals with one of the big four in order to gain access to this enormous global market. These arrangements allow companies to retain some financial and creative autonomy, while enjoying the benefits of transnational industry.

Real World Records works through this kind of agreement with Virgin/EMI, which is now part of the Warner-EMI Music Group. While Real World and Womad, then, do the majority of their own promotion and music publishing, the distribution for albums on the label is performed through the transnational industry.[15]

The relationship between the local and the transnational present in this agreement is mirrored in a number of ways in the larger issues of hybridity discussed here. Real World and Womad perceive of themselves as an autonomous body, generating a sense of community around the idea of musical universalism, multiculturalism, and global unity. The organization has a physical locality (the UK) but, more importantly, a kind of virtual locality as a node in the global village. Its self-definition relies on its ability to identify the local (*traditional* music from Pakistan, from Turkemenistan, etc.), while employing a heavily transnationalized corporate machine to commodify and package those localities.

As Arjun Appadurai argues, with globalization "[t]he locality (both in the sense of the local factory or site of production and in the extended sense of the nation-state) becomes a fetish that disguises the globally dispersed forces that actually drive the production process" (Appadurai 42). The Real World colour-bar foregrounds locality (site of production and nation-state), but uses the language of globalization to obscure the politics of global production. Talk of music as a global or universal language allows

globalization to happen in the abstract, as a cultural phenomenon, without recognizing its financial and political impact.

Who consumes this globalized product? As I remarked earlier, Real World's web site and the Womad festivals suggest that the audience for world music products is not in fact the "world," but the West. But, Appadurai argues, this question may be a little misguided. The fetishism of the commodity becomes the "fetishism of consumer" [16] With this shift the question that should be asked is, rather, is it the producer or the consumer that has agency? Appadurai's answer is that what appears to be the agency of the consumer is actually at best the opportunity to choose between predetermined options, and that this masks the real agency of producers and the relations of global production.

Appadurai makes an important distinction, but misses what I think is the next important logical step: what is the agency of the producer? His model works well when applied to producer-consumer relationships in which an ultimately responsible producer can be identified (Coca-Cola vs. Pepsi might be an obvious example of this), but it falls short when we consider the complexity of the issues of production associated with something like *Star Rise.*

Star Rise is a cultural production, and not simply a tangible commodity. Who is the producer of culture here? I imagine that supporters of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and of Womad would argue that, as an artist, Khan is a producer of culture. Michael Brook is his producer; the liner notes of *Mustt Mustt* suggest an image of Khan as maker of raw materials, and Brook as the producer who shapes and refines them. The work of re-mixing on *Star Rise* adds yet another layer of complexity: each track, or version, is something unique in relation to the raw materials from which it is constructed, and each

new "rising star" becomes a producer. Each artist in some way points to himself as a product of South Asian cultural history in which Nusrat, coming full circle, is a producer.

Overarching all of that, however, is Real World Records. The record company provides the studio, the funding, the promotional budget, foots the cost of pressing albums and burning cd's, and handles distribution through its agreement with a transnational corporation. The record company produces cultural commodities which seem to support its concept of a global village style of globalization. But the record company is itself also a consumer of the cultural productions of the artists signed to it, paying for the labour that produces culture (note Aki Nawaz's comment on his discussion with Real World about getting paid for his work on *Star Rise*). By extension, the artists signed to the label are not only producers, but paid labour engaged in the manufacture of culture.

This is, for the purposes of my argument, the major aporia of hybridity talk. To modify Appadurai's model somewhat, I would argue that it is not only the agency of the consumer that is masked by globalizing relations of production, but the agency of the producer as well. Where it is possible to talk about the illusion of choice presented to the consumer, it is more difficult to talk about the illusion of local, autonomous artistic/cultural production when the agency of the producers themselves is thus masked.

Hybridity in this context is, in the beginning, a site for the articulation of the struggle for identity, and is then transformed into a marketable commodity based on ethnic authenticity and difference. As John Hutnyk argues, with this deployment of hybridity,

> it sometimes happens that a lesser place is accorded to intentional and targeted forms of politicized cultural production, ignoring both resistance to specific structural and institutional constraints and the almost inevitable hegemonic incorporation of random creativity through diffusion and dispersal of difference and its marketability. In this context, the *political* work of a band like Fun^Da^Mental (who are regulars at Womad events) or their label-mates Asian Dub Foundation can be obscured by a focus on the hybrid nature of their productions. (119)

Hutnyk argues here for a closer look at the political work and the sense of agency and identity that has been obscured by these global relations, and the anti-racist community activism of the Asian Underground artists he mentions is a key example of that.

In this chapter, I have argued that transnational corporatization and the forces of global political economy can obscure the agency articulated in productions like those of the Asian Underground. These forces promote hybridity as part of a move towards a universalized global community in which signifiers of cultural difference become a shared language, and where difference is simultaneously ignored and fetishized. In the next chapter, pursuing Hutnyk's line of inquiry, I will examine how hybridity can be employed as a constructive trope for discussing the politics of racism, ethnicity, authenticity, diaspora and competing nationalisms on a global scale, and as a mode of resistance to cultural political economy.

NOTES: Chapter 2

[1] There are many others: from the New Asian Kool to the New Asian Dance Music, but this one seems to be the most persistent. *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, published in 1996 before the term Asian Underground was popularized, uses many of these other terms.

[2] For the information of readers who might not be aware of the distinctions between these genres of music: Hip-hop is a genre of Black music which is characterized by heavy bass lines and breakbeat loops (breakbeats are syncopated drum patterns found in funk and soul songs). Hip-hop is usually in 4/4 time, and MC's 'rap' rhyming lyrics over the tracks. While hip-hop refers to the style of music and sometimes the sub-culture which surrounds it, rap refers specifically to this vocal style. Sped-up breakbeats are also incorporated into drum 'n' bass, a fast paced dance music of about 180 beats/minute, characterized by booming bass lines similar to those in reggae. Techno music is largely electronic, employing the use of samples, synthesisers, and drum machines, and drum 'n' bass shares some of these characteristics as well. 'Dance music' is a general category which would apply to both techno and drum 'n' bass, as well as other fast-paced electronically oriented music. Hip-hop is not usually included under this term. These definitions are of course simplified for the purpose of brevity: for a more detailed discussion, see *Altered State: The story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House*, by M. Collin and J. Godfrey (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997).

[3] Gilroy and Hebdige both provide explanations of hip-hop and dj mix culture: see Gilroy 103, Hebdige 141.

[4] See Hebdige 12, and 83.

[5] Call-and-response also a feature of African Diasporic music; see Gilroy, 78.

[6] Though the album was released after Nusrat's death, almost all of the tracks on the album were produced while he was still alive. The album became a posthumous tribute, but was not originally intended that way.

[7] Publishing in the music industry means that Real World Music Publishing and/or WOMAD Music Publishing (these are separate but associated companies) handles the copyright and royalties for this music. The release of the album on a particular label means that there is a contractual obligation between the company and the artist; labels handle the promotion and publicity for releases, and in some cases also handle the distribution. Many record labels have distribution agreements with larger record companies.

[8] The roots of rock music in the blues of Black America and the subsequent cooptation of it by white musicians are well documented. Dick Hebdige comments on Elvis's versioning of Black American music in the 1950's (Hebdige 14); one might also note Pat Boone's versioning of Little Richard. The rock and pop music produced by John Lennon, Gallagher, and Mercury come from a tradition whose roots are in Black America, but their UK location and white identity further hybridize what is already a hybrid genre.

[9] Nawaz and Fun^Da^Mental are noted in the UK for their anti-racist activism, and for their activist work against the UK's Criminal Justice Act. For more on this, see John Hutnyk's chapter "Repetitive Beat(ing)s or Criminal Justice," pp. 157-189 in Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma, *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* (Zed Press 1996).

[10] This is by no means to say that the 70's punk music scene was consistently anti-racist; much has been made of the incorporation of Nazi imagery, for example, into punk anti-

fashion styles, and certainly the National Front of Britain has a long association with Nazi skin-head punks. But the rise of the National Front was reacted to by anti-racist punks and people of colour, and it is equally important to note that Punk was just as influenced by Black music (especially reggae) as the Asian Underground are. For more information, see Kalra, Hutnyk, and Sharma, "Re-Sounding (Anti)Racism, or Concordant Politics? Revolutionary Antecedents," in Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma, *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, pp 127-155, and Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

[11] Quoted in Ashwani Sharma 23; Sweeny P. Directory of World Music ix (1991).

[12] WOMAD web site, http://realworld.ac.uk/womad/overview/index.html

[13] Real World Records web site, http://www.realworld.co.uk/rwr/background/index.html

[14] On January 24th, 2000 Time-Warner announced the inception of a joint venture between itself and British record company EMI. EMI was one of the big "5" record companies controlling publishing and royalties around the world, with its own subsidiaries. This joint venture will effectively merge the interests of both companies, with the resulting Warner EMI Ltd. becoming the second largest record company after Universal Music Group. This company will be headquarted in New York, relocating EMI from the UK.

[15] It is worth noting that EMI was once famous as the label which released early and seminal recordings by The Beatles, as well as the Sex Pistols (who recorded a song about the company), and thus has an important place in the history of British pop music.

[16] Appadurai 42.

Boundaries On Fire: Hybridity And The Political Economy Of Culture

Chapter Three

In the previous chapter, my discussion focused on the relationship between Asian Underground musicians and the global music industry. I argued that the absorption of 'hybrid' music into the cultural political economy of that industry undermines the potential of radical political action and cultural production by reproducing the music as a sign controlled by globalization. In order to do so the industry must simultaneously produce hybridity as both a symbol of cultural universality and as a marker of racial and cultural difference. Is it possible for hybrid productions to avoid this re/production by transnational industry? In this chapter, I will examine some of the ways in which hybrid productions reestablish themselves as sites of resistance to cultural political economy's cooptation of hybridity.

There are several questions that must be answered in order to establish this concept of resistance: Is hybridity intrinsically radical? Can cultural political economy completely defuse the radical potential of a hybrid project? Is it possible for hybrid cultural productions to be produced outside cultural political economy? Is it possible to work within such an economy and maintain the radical cultural and political perspective and identity of the artistic project? I will pursue these lines of inquiry through an examination of several examples of relationships between hybrid cultural productions and cultural political economy.

Hybridity and the Concept of the Radical

In both of the previous chapters I have described the works I have examined as radical. With its portrayal of a lesbian relationship in a traditional Hindu household, *Fire* is radical because it situates itself in opposition to traditional 'family values' conservatism in India and North America, and because the message surrounding the film is one that supports gay and lesbian rights. *Star Rise* constitutes a radical project both through its fusion of Indian, Pakistani, British and Black American musical forms and its association, through some of its Asian Underground artists, with anti-racism and political action.

I have consistently located my conception of hybridity in what I perceive to be radical, both in the sense of politics which challenge social norms and in terms of creative and artistic vision. A question arises out of this: is hybridity always radical? Does it, then, always locate itself within progressive politics?

My use of the word 'radical' marks the hybrid's difference from what is considered traditional, typical, or average in a particular dominant cultural ideology. It makes the hybrid something outside, 'underground', a new space created between such cultural standards. It is what Homi Bhabha calls the "Third Space of enunciations" (38). In this sense, the 'radical' hybrid is always other, marked by its difference.

But the word radical has another meaning, "from, of or pertaining to the root," which also influences my reading of hybridity. Biologically, the hybrid is that which is produced from two parent, or 'root' species, but which cannot be identified as belonging to the same species as either. If, as I have contended thus far, hybridity always at least begins as something radical, the connection to the figure of the root bears exploration.

The root, or prior ancestry, is fundamental to the construction of the hybrid. In the examples I have looked at thus far, hybridity is defined as a state of existence within multiple cultural locations which are fundamental to the production of the hybrid project. It is not sufficient then to talk about hybridity as something wholly other than the cultures from which it emerges, because its existence is always dependent on the prior recognition of 'roots': what locates hybridity outside of traditional cultural spaces is that it is brought about from more than one tradition or lineage. Multiplicity, therefore, is written into the idea of the hybrid. It is not simply that there is more than one tradition involved, but that those roots overlap and entangle each other. Thus, for example, Mehta's hybrid position is produced not only by her identity as a Canadian of South Asian descent, but also from the British Imperial conquest of both Canada and India and the subsequent oppression of indigenous people in both countries. Hybrid roots, therefore, exist in multiple spaces and times; they are not necessarily geographically or temporally fixed, or linear. In *Fire*, the persistent signs of continuing western cultural colonization in India, evident in the film's allusions to western film and social practices, remind us that colonialism reappears in ways that make it difficult to define what an authentic traditional Indian culture might look like.

Hybridity then, could be seen as rhizomatic. Biologically, the rhizome is a kind of underground root system that consists of complex matrixes of roots and plant shoots, where one part of the system is not separable from another. Deleuze and Guattari use this metaphor in juxtaposition with the tree (and its roots) as the symbol of genealogical modes of history, logic, and politics:

> The rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory . . . the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. It is tracings that must be put on the map, not the opposite. (21)

The rhizome is antigenealogy because it renders origins untraceable in a linear fashion. It is short term memory because its structure of systems and connections is constantly in flux. In this context, relations between cultures, nations and people are so susceptible to changes in the landscapes of media, political economy and world politics that each reading of one particular aspect of this web of relationships might make different connections. The rhizome is written onto the map because geographical and cultural lines are also always shifting.

Hybridity then, as much as it is defined by its roots, is shaped like a rhizome. There are always multiple lines of history and culture being drawn in to produce new works and identities. In this way, the figure of the rhizome can encompass both meanings of the radical. In its political sense, the rhizome maps relations of power in ways that expose the entanglement of hegemonies, opening the door to political action for progressive change. In the sense of pertaining to the root, the rhizome both acknowledges the pertinence of the hybrid's ancestry and addresses the complex and often non-linear patterns that such ancestry draws.

Hybridity is always radical in at least one, if not both, of these senses. While it may not always be deployed with intent to progressive political action, it is always radical in its construction. The radical in this double sense disrupts the idea of

globalization as a process of homogenization; in the cultural productions I have examined thus far, the politically radical has been neutralized in order to produce hybridity as a commodity in the cultural political economy. The radical nature of the hybrid production continues to be present because it is bound up in the idea of the hybrid itself, but through cultural political economy it is transmuted in one of two ways: hybridity becomes either a signifier of authenticity, or a signifier of cultural homogenization through globalization.

Hybridity and the Relations of Consumption and Production

If hybrid productions are ontologically radical, and that radicality is neutralized through the global political economy, then the question is whether it is possible to create productions outside of that economy.

The short answer to this question is no. The political economy of culture is one interpretation of what Frederic Jameson calls late capitalism, or what Arif Dirlik calls the new global capitalism, which "represents an unprecedented penetration of local society globally by the economy and culture of capital" (1996, 28). This new, "postmodern" capitalism is far-reaching, complex, decentred and intrinsic to contemporary economic relations. Within this structure, all relations of production are in some way tied to global capitalism. A cultural production made for reproduction and mass distribution, even at a local or small-scale level, is connected with the global economy even at the level of materials. It is a commodity which is produced from other commodities, labour and materials. It is possible to record your own music, or publish your own work, but even to do so at no profit necessitates some level of participation in global economy: paper made from North American trees, or recording equipment made by Japanese corporations are

rhizomatically connected to global economy, even in terms of its effects at the local level. Producers of culture are therefore always participants in the global economy as consumers first.

Works of art, information, and entertainment are traded in the world system as signs of cultural representation, be it of a subcultural group, an ethnic or national group, or as a sign of the emergence of the global village. The value of a cultural production as a commodity in the cultural economy is determined first by its authenticity, and subsequently by its appeal to the widest market. Hybrid productions present special problems to that economy because their value is indeterminate until the problem of radicality is dealt with. Radical hybrid productions unsettle systems for calculating value based on authenticity, and expose the hegemonic structure of cultural political economy.

One of the ways in which hybrid productions can do this is by complicating the relationship between producer, labour, and consumer. Producers begin as consumers themselves, not only of material products, but of cultural products. Hybrid producers have or claim access to cultural products from diverse traditions, making it difficult to assess them in the first place as a market. The products they make are not easily identified in existing models of cultural traditions. When a musician signs a recording contract, or a writer is published by an international firm, each becomes the part of the labour power of a corporate machine. Because very frequently cultural productions are located in national and ethnic traditions, countries themselves become producers, while those who make productions are labour. This is as much true of tourist-oriented mass-produced productions like textiles, pottery and jewelry as it is of literature, film and music. Thus, it is possible to talk about Jamaican reggae, or Canadian film, while Bob

Marley and Atom Egoyan become the labour that is engaged in that commodity's production. Hybrid productions are never so easily locatable at the outset; the controversy over Deepa Mehta's status as an Indian or Canadian film maker, the strategic and deliberate national labeling of Real World Record's releases, or even Salman Rushdie's status as writer in exile are examples of this.

A tension is created between the attempt to authenticate, localize or neutralize hybrid cultural productions, and the return of the radical in hybrid forms. This tension is caused by the cultural political economy's inability to ever completely defuse the radical element of such productions. One way in which hybrid cultural producers resist the neutralization of radicality in their work, given that it is impossible to exist outside the cultural political economy is to develop strategies to trouble the culture industry's attempt to authenticate and localize them.

An example of this can be found in the work of The Fire This Time. Taking its name as an allusion to James Baldwin's book 1962 book *The Fire Next Time*, The Fire This Time is a project conceived by black Canadian music producer Patrick Andrade to encourage musical dialogue between people of the African diaspora and Native North Americans, particularly around issues of race and class struggle.[1] Andrade is, very literally, unlocatable. Under the pseudonym "the Dubitista," Andrade travels to various parts of the world, working as an activist with indigenous people of various countries who are fighting for human rights, land claims, and against racism. He maintains a veil of secrecy about his location, mainly because the guerrilla activism he participates in puts him and the people he works with in political danger. He then records the sounds of the people he lives and works with, when they give him permission. He takes those sounds

to the studio, where he collaborates with artists like Asian Dub Foundation, Chuck D of Public Enemy, and John Trudell, and a host of black and Native musicians who form the Fire This Time collective.

In producing music in this way, The Fire this Time performs several acts of resistance against cultural political economy. Neither Andrade nor his project or his music fit easily into any existing models of national, cultural, or ethnic authentication. The music they make, though some of it is borrowed from people from various parts of the world, does not fit into the category of world music; indeed, it is more often classified as reggae or as dance music. While Andrade is the founder of the project, it functions as an open collective, so that there is no clear lineage of intellectual ownership in the production of the music.

The Fire this Time also uses alternative modes of distribution of their recordings in order to resist cultural political economy. In an interview, Andrade told me that exploring these alternative, non-traditional modes is part of the band's focus:

> When we first started out doing music, I think we were probably a bit different from most bands in that before we actually started recording, we took a year and we studied the business, studied distribution. We went into record stories and talked to people in retail, at radio stations, we made an effort to understand how the system works. We were possibly a bit different from other people of colour who were doing this because we had that kind of knowledge and that kind of strategy of wanting to do it outside the system.[2]

Until 1999, the group had two separate record company contracts, one with Australian independent label Extreme Records, and another with the European dance music label Dorado.[3] These relationships were developed by the group in order to optimize their control over distribution in various markets:

> We realized that Extreme could do Australia and New Zealand, and they were willing to make an effort in North America, but we realized that there was no way they could do it in Europe and Japan, so we didn't give it to them. We gave it to Dorado Records, one of the best independent European labels for dance music. What we did is we split up territories, we gave certain things to Extreme and to Dorado, we gave Europe and Japan. This was a very deliberate strategy on our part in terms of trying to make an effort to make certain that our work would be treated with the respect that it needed to, given the confines of dealing with any kind of record company. . .[For example] with Dorado, we have things in our contract like, when we use traditional [indigenous] songs, we're like, you understand that this stuff can't be used in any ads, especially for tobacco, or alcohol, nothing related to alcohol, and they don't totally understand, but they agree to it.

The relationship with Dorado to date remains one that Andrade describes as comfortable. Recently, however, ending their contract with Extreme, The Fire This Time recalled their recordings released on that label. They have begun distributing these copies for free in prisons, people living on North American Native reserves, and to the various indigenous groups with whom they collaborate.[4] Since most of the musicians involved with group

are engaged in other projects, they are able to forfeit potential profits from this one. Additionally, the launching of a web site has enabled the group to distribute MP3 recordings for free over the Internet. Andrade describes MP3 technology as a way "out" of record industry distribution. Indeed, at present, this technology is becoming highly controversial because it enables consumers to procure recordings for free, resulting in lowered record company profits and musicians' royalties. This is precisely the goal that The Fire This Time is working towards. MP3 technology also ensures that the group's recordings are available to people who would not have access to them through mainstream record shops, as well as maintaining control over the constitution of its listening market.

With these strategies, Andrade defies the record industry's attempts to classify this music, to authenticate The Fire This Time within a national tradition, to posit the work as evidence of universal globalization, and ultimately to make money from their work. The music of the Fire This Time draws on traditions from around the world, but Andrade's activist and creative work remains rooted in the local, and at the grass roots level.

While researching the Fire This Time, I discovered that the project's several releases are listed on CDNow.com, one of the Internet's pre-eminent on-line music stores.[5] This company orders directly from record companies, and sends recordings directly to the consumer. While Andrade told me that the company had been asked to remove the recordings from their catalog, at the time of this writing this had not yet been done. That The Fire This Time might be a commodity in the trade of an enormous and transnational company is a fact of the impossibility of releasing mass-produced media without participating in the cultural political economy, even at the global scale.

However, while this may be unavoidable, Andrade's refusal to be literally and figuratively located by the industry makes it impossible to ignore the radical nature of his project.

What the project does do is engender a sense of community. A review of The Fire This Time's 1995 album *Dancing on John Wayne's Head* describes the project thus:

> Stretched over the album's 10 tracks is a spare dub groove colored by the sounds and voices of oppression suffered by black and Native American peoples. Snippets of dialogue, poems and spoken word pieces are used as much for their musical texture as their ideological potency, in some instances melding the traditions of indigenous musics with the voice of a North American or Jamaican orator. As a musical and socially oriented project, the Fire This Time forms a convincing plea for progress and unity.[6]

By incorporating the sounds of multiple voices, experiences and histories, The Fire This Time does not simply create a new hybrid form. The unity described in the review is a collective solidarity around resistance to global hegemony and the oppression of racism. By consciously refusing to locate itself in any one tradition or geographical location, The Fire This Time creates a sense of community built around the idea of resistance and experience, rather than along national or ethnic lines.

Looking at The Fire This Time with the figure of the rhizome in mind, it is clear that the idea of ethnic roots is foundational to this hybrid production, but that those roots are consciously traced in ways that produce a fluid and intricate dialogue between cultural locations. By invoking the sensibility of dub, the process of sampling, re-mixing

and editing, and by using a multi-disciplinary approach to the construction of music (via the incorporation of spoken word sounds), the project resists the music industry's desire to trace a cultural history or lineage within the music. At the same time, the dialogue that is encouraged by this project engenders a sense of community among people suffering racial oppression in such a way that the system of power is exposed as part of the structure of globalization. This community is not organized around ethnic, cultural or national identity as the primary category; rather, it is organized around expressions of the experience of colonization, diaspora, and racism.

What makes The Fire This Time different from *Star Rise* is that it is released, promoted, and maintained in a manner which allows it to resist industry categorization. It deploys authenticity according to its own strategies, and is critical of globalization. While the mandates of both the Fire This Time and of Womad proclaim music to be a unifying language, there is a critical difference. For the Fire This Time, music builds unity through the transgression of boundaries, but for Womad, music transcends boundaries. Womad produces world music as a fetish of tourism, so that festival goers in Reading, England, can experience the world in their own back yard, and Real World Records brings musicians to their own studios to record. In contrast, The Fire This Time, takes listeners into the back yards of the world.

The Global and the Local: Independent Production Companies

Among the strategies of resistance available to a hybrid project like this one is this idea of signing to small independent label, rather than to one associated or owned by a transnational corporation. But this is not always practical or effective. For The Fire This

Time, this relationship was at one point the most attractive option. The record labels to which the collective was signed do not represent themselves as purveyors of world music, but rather of independent music projects that are innovative and unique. Extreme Records's reputation is built on releasing experimental music which blurs the lines of genre. Dorado Records is a dance music label, with a reputation for releasing politically oriented electronic music. Both labels presented the opportunity to the band of forging personal relationships with a small company, rather than getting lost in a bureaucracy.

For music recording artists, independent record labels afford a certain degree of control over how productions are marketed and distributed. This does not, however, exempt such productions from becoming commodities in cultural political economy. One example of this process can be found in Canada, where the major venue for independent label releases is campus/community radio. These small independent radio stations are governed by the Canadian Radio-Television Commission which provides them with specific percentages by category of what kind of music they are allowed to play. These categories are designed to identify music that is not "mainstream," and therefore do not receive play on commercial stations. When an independent recording becomes commercially successful, as tends to happen with hip-hop and dance music in particular, it is typically removed from the playlist. The implication of this seems to be that independent music is a "launching pad" for commercial success. Many artists, however, choose to avoid that success in order to maintain creative autonomy through an independent label relationship.

For many artists, then, what the independent labels lack in distribution power they make up for in freedom and creative control. Parmela Attariwala's 1997 release *Beauty*

Enthralled: New Music Inspired by India is an example. Attariwala is a Indian Canadian violinist, trained in Indian and European classical traditions. The contemporary pieces she chose for the recording were composed by people of various national origins, but each develops traditional Indian themes in the context of classical western composition. The music is often experimental, and thus is unlikely to receive major label interest, or wide commercial success. The album was released on Hornblower Records, a Canadian independent label, with funding from the Alberta Council for the Arts. Government funding is one way in which the machinations of cultural political economy are at work in the production of the recording, aligning it with the Canadian discourse of multiculturalism. On the other hand, an independent label provides Attariwala as arranger and performer of the pieces a certain degree of control over how they are produced.

For film makers, independent production works in a similar way. Feature length films tend to cost a great deal to make, and film makers often have to campaign sponsors for funding.[7] With *Fire,* Mehta was able to raise funds through non-corporate means, and to produce the film with an independent production house. Independent films such as this are almost always played in repertory theatres rather than in large chains, because the latter tend to have contractual agreements with larger production houses. If *Fire* had received government funding, it might have been recognized as a Canadian film. It did not, and this certainly has had an effect on the way in which the film has been received throughout the world. As I noted in Chapter One, government funding would also have dictated to Mehta how the film was cast, but by producing it as an independent production without such funding she was able to control this aspect of the film.

When distribution to a wide audience is an important part of the intent of the production, artists turn to larger companies that are capable of providing these at a large scale. Particularly for hybrid productions, when the audience is often composed of diasporic people, a global distribution system is a great advantage. Hindi films, for example, have an audience which spans North America, the Caribbean, and large parts of Asia. Such films are sometimes distributed by film houses, and illegal copies are often circulated when no distribution system is available. The Fire This Time has moved towards their own system of distribution, recognizing that their disparate and scattered audience of political activists and indigenous people are not always able to access their recordings through mainstream outlets. In this way, The Fire This Time attempts to create a sense of community that is not fostered along the boundaries of race, ethnicity and nationality, but rather around the collective experience of oppression.

Re/Distribution and Major Label Power

Star Rise, the album through which I discussed the Asian Underground in the previous chapter, is a major label release with wide distribution, intended to reach a wide audience, not only of diasporic South Asians, but also of fans of world music. As a compilation, it represents the work of some central figures in the Asian Underground scene, but it does not definitively represent the methods and strategies of the artists associated with it. While some artists prefer working independently, others are comfortable signing with major labels.

Bally Sagoo, for example, is a well-established re-mix artist and dj who signed a contract worth over US$1 Million with Columbia Records, a Sony subsidiary, in 1994. Sagoo's contract contains a clause specifying that he has control of "Asian content"

(Hutnyk 1997: 118). In this way, Sagoo gains the power of global distribution, but protects at least some of his creative rights, although, as Ashwani Sharma points out, the attraction for Sony is not the possibility of a market for Asian hybrid music, but the potential interest of a world market composed of diasporic people (26).

Sagoo, unlike many of the artists who are represented on *Star Rise*, does not make music from an explicitly political position. Though his hybrid production is radical in the sense of pertaining to roots, the Sony contract, and the market share to which he subsequently has access, indicate that, unlike those politically radical hybrid productions which attempt to subvert the system of cultural political economy, Sagoo's work fits neatly into the model defined by the system. In this sense, Sagoo's work already occupies the space that Real World intended for *Star Rise*.

But many of the artists on *Star Rise* come from activist backgrounds that, like Andrade's, reiterate the radical nature of their music. Asian Dub Foundation is composed of students and teachers from the Community Music House in London. The Community Music House is a community centre dedicated to teaching young people about music and music technology. In 1993, Dr. Das and Pandit G taught a series of workshops for Asian youth which inspired them to form Asian Dub Foundation along with 15 year old student Deedar Zaman. Coming from the community at a local level, the project of Asian Dub Foundation was conceived at the outset as a grass roots activist project. The *Rough Guide to Rock*'s biography of ADF describes this activism this way:

> The ADF found a welcoming fan base among the anti-fascist movement, addressing the issue of racism as it affected Britain's ethnic minorities in

> general. 'Massive not passive' became their catchphrase, a reaction to the stereotypical image of Asian people as doormats. [8]

Asian Dub Foundation, as I have described here and in the previous chapter, makes music that is explicitly political, and specifically anti-racist. Their 1998 release *Rafi's Revenge* contains a song called "Free Satpal Ram," which protests the imprisonment of a young British Asian man for self-defence in a racially motivated assault. Another song chronicles the Naxalite peasant workers' uprisings in India in the early 1960's.

Rafi's Revenge was released on London Records, a division of Polygram, which is part of the Universal Music Group, the largest of the Big Four record companies. There seems to a be a certain degree of irony in this relationship, or at least incongruity: how could a group with such a strong left wing mandate sign a contract with the largest record company in the world? An answer might be found in the lyrics of the ADF song "Hypocrite":

> Redistribution is the name of the game/All the cash that you stashed man/we're gonna give away/ . . . PR consultant, journalist, advertiser/we know your game and you think that we're playing it/when the bill comes through the door you're gonna be paying it.[9]

The listener can imagine that list of "cash-stashers" to include the record company itself. Certainly, it is the record company that is footing the bill for promotion, production and distribution costs. The imagery of underprivileged young people "taking back" power and money is very prevalent in hip-hop. What is different here from mainstream contemporary hip-hop is the notion of redistributing wealth, rather than simply making money.[10] Here, the ADF acknowledge their major label affiliation, but reconstruct it in

the context of the music so that it is clear that they interpret their side of that relationship as a subversive act. Asian Dub Foundation believe that they are taking advantage of the record company, rather than the other way around.

In contrast to the independent label recording artists I described in the previous section, the band has prioritized the power of distribution over the advantages of working with an independent label. Through wide distribution, the ADF are able to expand the sense of anti-racist community that they exhort in their music, and in this way are able to reiterate the radical political nature of their cultural productions. The distribution power, and the notion of "taking back" wealth make the major label contract attractive, but it is only through the explicit citation of the band's political position that these ideas are clarified for the listener. For example, with major label distribution generally comes a budget for promotion. Andrade, who is currently collaborating with ADF, tells the following story which illustrates the advantage this creates:

> There are people who are on major labels but, like say ADF, they don't like the major label, but they have been working with them over the years and they have figured them out, and now they are trying to manipulate them to do good things. For instance, one of the things ADF's manager told me they are very proud of is that they made the record company pay to have all these posters done to promote their single "Free Satpal Ram." What happens? This major label ends up putting up all these posters that say, "Free Satpal Ram!" Because that's the name of the single![11]

This story provides a concrete example of the way in which a band can in fact take advantage of a major label relationship, even to the extent of having it inadvertently stage

a radical political campaign under the guise of promotion. The Asian Dub Foundation, then, provides an example of deliberately working with a major label within the structure of cultural political economy precisely so that radical politics can be foregrounded and widely disseminated.

Hybrid Industry: Building Community

Wide-spread distribution, such as the Universal Music Group has to offer, allows music and messages like those of Asian Dub Foundation to reach an extremely large audience of Indian diasporic and other people in the UK, North America, and in Asia. One of the immediate advantages to this, for both the ADF and for artists like Bally Sagoo, is to be able to reach members of the South Asian diaspora in different parts of the world. Sagoo's Hindi film re-mixes are popular in the Caribbean, for example, where there is a large diasporic South Asian population, as is the ADF's genre-bending hip-hop/drum n' bass style, heavily influenced by the music of the Caribbean. As dance musics, both artists' productions are also popular in Europe and North America among non-South Asians. For Asian Dub Foundation, however, the notion of building ties among South Asian diasporic communities, as well as racial solidarity around anti-racism, are at the forefront of their musical and activist project. Asian Dub Foundation's community ties are constantly reinforced in their music, as their 2000 release *Community Music*, also on London Records, makes clear.

As much as there are disadvantages of distribution with independent labels, with major label affiliations there is the danger of commodification at the expense of radical hybridity, as the example of *Star Rise* illustrates. A third possibility, that of independent

labels with major label distribution, also exists. This option offers artists the opportunity to control the production of their work, but also provides access to a diasporic audience.

In 1995, as the Asian Underground music was coming to the forefront of the UK dance music scene, one such label was developed. A group of young South Asians simultaneously launched a record label and a club called Outcaste. Previous to Outcaste, clubs catering to a young Asian crowd played mostly Bhangra and related music. Outcaste was an innovation, specializing only in what shortly thereafter came to be known as Asian Underground music. Dj Ritu, a British Asian woman whose successes have included a program on the BBC's World Service, was one of the founders of the club and the record label, and describes the project in this way:

> One of the things I said to Shabs [an associate] before we started the label was 'Wouldn't it be nice to see a day where it'd be cool to be down with the Asian?' I think the music has an awful lot to do with it. It's broken down barriers. It's given us predominant street style, credibility. I would hope that with our label we could push the music out to different markets, bigger markets, and create new forms and styles of music that encompass being Asian and being British and maybe one day it will be cool to be down with the Asians too. (Huq 76)

Ritu's comments suggest that Outcaste, with its mandate to explore expressions of British Asian hybridity through new music, is concerned with building community, and a subculture, around Asian identity.

The name Outcaste alludes both to the specific social issues associated with the Indian caste system, and to the historical lack of social acceptance and tolerance of

Asians in the UK. In contrast to Real World Records and Womad, Outcaste does not intend to produce world music, but rather music specific to British Asian, and Asian diasporic, hybridity. As part of the music industry, Outcaste deploys itself as a label that is concerned with the difference, uniqueness and plurality of hybrid music, rather than positing it as the universal language of globalization.

The label's major successes have been with three compilations, entitled "Untouchable Outcaste Beats," each of which anthologizes tracks from Asian Underground artists, as well as older tracks by world music artists from the 1960's and 70's like sitarist Ananda Shankar. One of Outcaste's contract signers, Nitin Sawnhey, appears on *Star Rise*, and a Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan track, licensed from Real World/Virgin Records appears on the second compilation. Outcaste's other artists, including dj/producers Badmarsh and Shri, have an exclusive relationship with the label that supports creative autonomy.

By simultaneously launching a club and a record label, Outcaste goes beyond a label's work of making music available to listeners. It offers a space in which those listeners can develop that sense of community by actually congregating and talking to each other about issues like the experience of racism, immigration, and diaspora. It has also increased the profile of Asian subculture in the UK. In the five years since the inception of Outcaste Records, the label has indeed accomplished Ritu's goal of being "down with the Asian."

In 1998, Outcaste Records signed a distribution deal with Tommy Boy Records. This deal allowed the label to have access to the large US market both of diasporic South Asians, and of consumers of dance music. In this way, the label has met the goals

outlined by DJ Ritu above, and is able to provide wide distribution to albums produced specifically in the context of Asian hybridity.

Countering Cultural Economic Hegemony

I began this chapter by asking if it was possible for hybrid productions to maintain radical politics and perspective within the global cultural economy. Along with radical politics, the question also becomes one of aesthetics, creativity and identity. The examples I have given choose different routes towards maintaining and reiterating radical hybridity. Patrick Andrade and The Fire This Time do this through radical political action, and align themselves with an independent label. Asian Dub Foundation, on the other hand, are signed with the world's largest record company, and yet deploy that relationship in a way that supports their sense of community activism.

Outcaste Records offers an example of a hybrid *company* at two levels: first, it specifically dedicates itself to a hybrid and diasporic community and, second, it blends the creative advantages of an independent label with the distribution power of a larger one. To return to the idea of the hybrid as rhizomatic, Outcase presents both an example of utilizing and subverting the structures of cultural political economy, and of creating alliance, rather than filiation (Deleuze and Guattari 25).

None of these routes are necessarily the best, or most useful ways to disseminate mass-produced hybrid cultural productions. Each of them, however, represents ways in which hybridity can be reclaimed within the global economy as a site of cultural difference, rather than as a symbol of homogenous globalization.

NOTES: Chapter 3

[1] The title of Baldwin's 1962 book comes from an old spiritual: "god gave noah the rainbow sign/no more water, the fire next time!"

[2] This quotation comes from an interview I conducted with Patrick Andrade, Sunday April 16th, 2000. The interview, which was over two hours in duration, was arranged by email through a mutual contact, and conducted by telephone. Andrade would not divulge his location, out of fear that he is being sought by authorities. There are several excerpts of this interview which Andrade explicitly asked me not to refer to at all, again for reasons of safety. There are also some segments which Andrade ambivalently suggested that I could refer to without direct reference to his comments. Therefore, some of the information I have provided here comes from that interview, but in compliance to his wishes I have not attributed them to him. Some of this information can be found on the group's web site, at http://members.xoom.com/firethistime.

[3] The Extreme Records web site can be found at http://www.xtr.com. Dorado can be found at http://dorado.co.uk.

[4] Information about these projects is available on members.xoom.com/firethistime.

[5] See http://www.cdnow.com. This information was verified at the time of my interview with Andrade, but may have since been changed.

[6] College Music Journal, May, 1995

[7] One famous example of this can be found in Robert Rodriguez, the director who financed his first feature length film *El Mariachi*, by getting paid to participate in medical

experiments—in effect, selling his body to science. He wrote a book about his experiences, called *Rebel Without a Crew: Or, How a 23 Year Old Film Maker with $7000 became a Hollywood Player* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

[8] From *The Rough Guide To Rock.*

[9] Asian Dub Foundation, "Hypocrite." *Rafi's Revenge*, London Records, 1998.

[10] Especially in the mid to late 1990s, mainstream hip-hop has seen an influx of rappers whose lyrics talk mainly about money, making money through drug dealing, pimping and gang-banging, purchasing luxury items with that money, etc. References to this can be found easily in the work of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, both rappers who were killed in what appears to be gang-related violence, and more recently of the group of rappers known as the Cash Money crew.

[11] Interview with Patrick Andrade, April 16th, 2000.

Boundaries On Fire: Hybridity And The Political Economy Of Culture

Conclusion

The central purpose of this thesis has been to map out the possibilities of hybridity within the context of the political economy of culture. I defined this cultural political economy as the system of relations of production and consumption of culture perpetuated by global capitalism and transnational industry. With *Fire*, I established the ways in which hybridity can be reconstructed in cultural political economy as an authentic version of itself. *Star Rise* provided an example of the way in which this kind of ethnically authenticized hybridity can be co-opted as a cultural commodity. These examples showed that hybridity has contradictory potential as a theoretical construct and as a mode of political identification: it can perform as an expression of experiences 'between' cultures, but can also be reinvented as a signifier of global universalization.

In the third chapter, a range of hybrid cultural productions gave evidence of the ways in which hybrid artists can rescue their cultural productions from cooptation in the political economy of culture, using different strategies to counter the homogenizing effect of transnational industry. With these examples, it becomes apparent that hybridity's double trajectories must be carefully observed. In order for hybridity to resist cultural political economy, the producers of cultural commodities must establish agency over the production of hybrid identity, and of the commodities themselves.

Pnina Werbner argues that hybridity must be understood as "processual," and that hybridity theory must differentiate between "a politics that proceeds from the legitimacy

of difference, in and despite the need for unity, and a politics that rests on a coercive unity, ideologically grounded in a single monolithic truth" (21). I agree that hybridity cannot be understood as a temporally and spacially fixed moment, for to do so implies aligning it with the fixed conception of ethnicity that is necessary for global capitalism. Hybridity as identity is fluid; it contains multiple roots and possibilities. Even when considered as a theoretical apparatus, hybridity must also be approached as a fluid construct. Because it is not, like postcolonial theory, exclusively linked to particularities of colonial history and geography, it is open to an enormous array of interpretations and applications. Hybridity is, in effect, a theoretical double agent: it can be deployed to support or subvert the processes of global capitalism. In order for it to be useful as a mode of critique of globalization, the location of agency in its deployment must be consistently identified.

One of the major armaments of globalization is consumerism. Global capitalism requires ever-expanding markets, and products which appeal to an ever-widening range of people. Culture as a commodity must be divested of its radical or oppositional potential. Under the power of transnational industries, Masao Miyoshi argues,

> culture will be kept to museums, and the museums, exhibitions, and theatrical performances will be swiftly appropriated by tourism and other forms of commercialism. No matter how subversive at the beginning, variants will be appropriated transgressively by branches of consumerism, such as entertainment and tourism, as were rap music, graffiti art, or even classical music and high arts. (1996, 95)

The political economy of culture which I have examined throughout this thesis uses exactly these strategies. It breeds what Miyoshi calls "neocolonialism," seeking to draw boundaries around ethnicities as the European empires drew borders around their possessions. Neocolonial transnational corporations find cultural commodities as lucrative as colonists found the nations of their occupation. The complex relations of production and consumption engendered by hybrid productions sometimes obscure the element of agency, but it is possible for producers to reclaim their agency from transnational industry. Hybridity can maintain its potential to resist this necolonial globalization only when producers of hybrid cultural productions are the agents of its deployment.

Nevertheless I think it is dangerous to posit neocolonialism, or the political economy of culture, as the final or ultimate effect of globalization. Appadurai is careful to note that globalization can also lead to positive changes, as in what he calls "the imagination as social practice":

> An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just imagined communities) and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them. (31).

Hybrid cultural productions, as art and as artifact, are products of the imagination that Appadurai claims is central to all forms of agency in global culture.

The fact that hybrid productions, and their producers, are able to envision ways of subverting globalization and its hegemonic structures suggests that the structure of cultural political economy will continue to change. Dirlik puts it this way:

> Local resistance under the circumstances must be translocal both in consciousness and action if is to be meaningful at all . . . . The dilemma is heightened by the fact that local consciousness, which is necessary as the basis for resistance, contradicts the translocal activity and consciousness that is a necessity of successful resistance. If this contradiction is overcome, the very fragmentation of the globe by capital may be turned to an advantage by resistance movements: the demand for the authentically local against its exploitation as a means to assimilation may "overload" global capitalism, driving it to fragmentation. (41)

Through their double radicalism, hybrid productions are able to overcome this contradiction. The 'in-between' space that they inhabit allows them to be at once local and translocal; this allows them to exist, as I suggested in Chapter 2, in a kind of hyperlocality. When the producers of such cultural productions have agency over hybridity, and are able to use it to deploy their work as tools of resistance to cultural political economy, the kind of overload described by Dirlik truly becomes a possibility.

I have attempted to identify specific characteristics of the cultural political economy that manipulates the construction of hybridity in cultural production. My discussion of this economy is not intended to give a final or totalizing critique of globalization, but rather to offer a mapping of a series of trajectories of the forces of global capitalism. Just as hybridity is not a stable or fixed theoretical proposition, and is

therefore open to change and manipulation, the political economy of culture is a system in flux; only time can tell how this system will change. The purpose of this thesis, ultimately, has been to challenge the concept of hybridity by testing it against its own contradictions, and to establish cultural political economy as one of the major sites of its manipulation in the contemporary world. The theory of hybridity I am proposing may not prove able to attend to the task of resistance I have assigned it; nevertheless the productions to which I have applied the term throughout this thesis contain within them the possibilities of resistance to cultural exploitation in the name of globalization.

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