



Susan Stanford Friedman

## "Border Talk," Hybridity, and Performativity

*Cultural Theory and Identity in the Spaces between Difference*<sup>1</sup>

Such bankrupt metaphors as the melting pot and the mosaic, clearly useless for adequately expressing identities in a multicultural context, are replaced by a different kind of conceptualization whereby the very notion of "inbetweenness" comes alive by setting in creative conjunction three current rhetorics of identity pervasively a feature of cultural studies across the disciplines: "border talk," "hybridity talk," and "performativity talk." Whereas these different rhetorics seem quite distinct, if not contradictory, actual narratives of and about identity often set in motion all three, establishing a fluid borderland where boundaries are frequently transgressed. As a conclusion, the proposed theoretical framework is put to the test through the work of two American women writers of today: Anna Deavere Smith and Gish Gen.

Twilight is that time of day between day and night  
limbo, I call it limbo,  
and sometimes when I take my ideas to my  
homeboys  
they say, well Twilight, that's something you can't  
do right now,  
that's an idea before its time.  
So sometimes I feel as though I'm stuck in limbo  
the way the sun is stuck between night and day  
in the twilight hours.

Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

For all its important political achievements, the fixation on "difference" prevalent in the United States as a foundational principle in theorizing identity tends to obscure the liminal space in between difference, the border space of encounter, interaction, and exchange, the space of relation and the narratives of identity such relations engender. The image of the gorgeous mosaic as metaphor for American multicultural diversity epitomizes this problematic of erasure. A mosaic is made up of distinctly colored tiles separated from each other by a network of cement that forever disconnects its parts at the same time that it joins them to give an effect of the whole. The tiles themselves never touch; each remains unchanging, unique, fixed, impermeable. The nondescript cement is relevant to the design only insofar as it orders the tiles and disappears into the background. As an art form, the mosaic can be exquisite, shimmering in its relational effects, especially from afar. But as a metaphor for multiculturalism, the mosaic potentially reinforces the focus on difference and suppresses attention to what happens in the borderlands between difference, to the way difference itself is formed and reformed in an ongoing process of interaction, to the way the space inbetween is a site of constant migration, movement back and forth. By pointing out these implications of the rhetoric of the mosaic, I in no way intend a return to the discourse of the "melting pot," the familiar rhetoric of American assimilation whose historical realities have

meant the loss of cultural difference and absorption (often forced) into the mainstream Anglo–American traditions of the United States.

Instead, I want to turn the spotlight onto the limbo twilight of "inbetweenness" – beyond mosaics and melting pots – by setting in creative conjunction three current rhetorics of identity pervasively a feature of cultural studies across the disciplines. They are what I loosely call "border talk," "hybridity talk," and "performativity talk." The spread of all three reflects the accelerating processes of globalization and the intensification of migratory identities in what Arjun Appadurai has called the "global ethnoscape" of postmodernity.

## 1. "Border Talk"

Reflecting the material realities of borderland existence in the American Southwest, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) started it – started, that is, all the "border talk" in cultural studies, now spread far beyond the borders of her autobiographical prose/poem as a social discourse that addresses how individual and collective identities are materially, geographically, and psychologically based in contradiction. "I am a border woman," she explains, speaking for the particular condition of Chicanas growing up on the United States/Mexico border on land that the U.S. took from Mexico in 1948. "I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that tejas–Mexican border, and others, all my life" (Preface). Although *Borderlands* expresses a utopian vision of intercultural hybridity, Anzaldúa begins with and never loses sight of just how difficult life in the borderlands can be: "It 's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape" (Preface). Compensation for pain comes from the greater ability of a *mestiza* consciousness to accommodate the multiple positions she occupies and communities she belongs to as a racial minority in the U.S., a woman in two patriarchal cultures (Chicano and Anglo–American), a lesbian in pervasively homophobic settings at home and away from home, and as someone of a working class background: "However, there have been compensations for this *mestizaje*, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one 's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien ' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind. . . ." (Preface)<sup>2</sup> In the "border talk" of cultural theory to which Anzaldúa contributed so importantly, borders function symbolically and materially around the binaries of pure and impure, sameness and difference, inside and outside. Whether literal or figural, borders also function as a site of multiple contradiction. As Anzaldúa writes:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. . . . A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (Anzaldúa, 1987: 3).

Borders represent the idea of impermeability alongside the reality of permeability. Borders separate at the same time as they connect. They insist on purity, distinction, difference, but facilitate contamination, mixing, creolization. Borders fix, demarcate; but they are themselves imaginary, fluid,

always in the process of changing. Borders promise safety, security, a sense of being "at home"; borders also enforce exclusions, the state of being alien, foreign, and homeless. Borders materialize the Law, policing separations; but as such, they are always being crossed, transgressed, subverted. Borders are used to exercise power over others, but also to empower survival against a dominant force. They regulate migration, movement, travel – the flows of people, goods, ideas, and cultural formations of all kinds. As such, they undermine regulatory practices by fostering intercultural encounter and the concomitant production of syncretic heterogeneities and hybridities. Borderlands are the sites of murderous acts and hatred, like the grating of continental plates and their resulting violent eruptions. They are also locations of utopian desire, reconciliation, and peace.

Borders of all kinds are forever being crossed; but the experience of crossing depends upon the existence of borders in the first place. Above all and as a context for all, borders signify a contact zone where fluid differences meet, where power circulates in complex and multi-directional ways, where agency exists on both sides of the shifting and permeable divide.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. "Hybridity Talk"

With her call for the "*new mestiza consciousness*," here too Anzaldúa was instrumental in the spread through cultural studies of a new rhetoric of identity beyond the fixities of fundamentalist identity politics or what Paul Gilroy calls "ethnic absolutism." Basing its approach to identity on the principle of mixture, "hybridity talk" is highly charged, volatile, and controversial – in part because of its historical roots in racist ideology, but also in part because of its implicit challenge to the hegemony of "difference talk" to which many are deeply wedded. Although the related terms of creolization, syncretism, *mestizaje*, and *métissage* invoke different resonances, histories, and cultural locations, they – like hybridity – gesture toward the interrelated phenomena of biological, linguistic, cultural, spiritual, and political mixing produced through some sort of border crossing.

A brief, bird's eye view of the terrain of debate about hybridity suggests little fixity or consensus of meaning. I see three models, two cultural functions, and three political formations of hybridity operative in cultural studies today. (See Figure 1.) The first model assumes the fusion of disparate elements to constitute the creation of entirely new biological or cultural forms. The second model posits the ongoing interplay of different forms, each of which remains recognizably distinct, however much it might be changed in its syncretist context. The third model challenges the very notion of difference upon which the first two modes are based, positing hybrid forms as the ongoing mixing of the always already mixed.

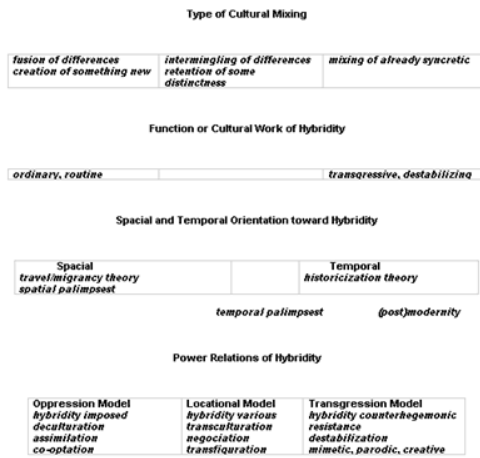


Fig. 1. Mapping Hybridity Theory

Source: Friedman, 1998: 85.

Of course, the boundaries between these three models are themselves permeable. Jazz, for example, can be used as a telling example for all three modes of hybridity. As an instance of fusion hybridity, jazz is an entirely new and distinct musical form born of the mixing of West African and Anglo–European musical practices. As interplay hybridity, jazz combines elements of West African and Anglo–European musics, easily identifiable to a trained ear. As always already hybridity, jazz mixes musics which are themselves the products of continual musical syncretism within West Africa, the United States, Europe and Britain, along with influences from other continents. Rooted in the US, jazz has nonetheless taken many cultural forms within these boundaries and has continued its syncretist development as it travels worldwide.

The cultural work of hybridity – whatever its mode – is theorized in two basic ways. For some (especially cultural anthropologists, who tend to focus on cultural formations and practices, *culture* with a small c), hybridity is an entirely routine, inevitable, and ordinary part of all cultural formations as they emerge, change, and travel through time and across space. (See, for example, the work of Renato Rosaldo and Michael Taussig.) For others (especially cosmopolitan diasporics like Salman Rushdie and Homi Bhabha, who address aesthetic and representational forms, *Culture* with a big C), hybridity is transgressive, a creative force that disrupts, denaturalizes, and potentially dismantles hegemonic cultural formations. The politics of hybridity is fiercely contested, with advocates, denouncers, and ambivalents lining up on all sides. The fundamental question is how hybridity relates to power relations in the borderlands between difference. Is hybridity imposed or embraced? Who benefits? Is it reciprocal or one–sided? Does it enhance one group's power at the expense of others? Is it the luxury of the privileged? the unchosen reality of the least empowered? Is it revolutionary or regressive? Does hybridity talk represent a much–needed alternative to the binaries of center–periphery, First and Third World, self–other? to the excesses of identity politics? Or, does hybridity talk fall back into romantic utopianism, obscuring the real relations of power that maintain inequitable structures of difference. Basically, I sort the debate over politics into three positions. First, there is the view that hybridity results from some form of colonizing domination. Second, there is the opposing belief that hybridity is a form of oppositional resistance to hegemonies of all kinds. A third position refuses to assign a fixed politics (good or bad) to hybridity and instead insists upon a historically and

geographically specific reading of hybridic formations, one that takes into account the complex ways in which power circulates.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. "Performativity Talk"

What has been less explored in the sea of border and hybridity talk is the way that the production of identity – individual and collective – involves performative imitation at the borders of difference. To sketch out the fruitful linkages, I want to untangle the different threads of performativity talk that weave themselves into theories of identity, threads I'll call the ethnographic, the radical constructivist and the oppositional. All of these rhetorics draw from and usually blend in a form of interplay hybridity two distinct and overarching approaches to performance: first, linguistic theories associated with the term *performativity*; and, second, theatrical theories identified with the term performance.

The linguistic approach to performativity developed by speech act theory in the wake of J. L. Austin's seminal work, especially *How to Do Things with Words* (1955, 1975), examines the way in which some speech performs a deed through the act and in the singular moment of utterance, as in the marriage vow "I do" or the biblical imperative "Let there be light!" The act of speech itself is a performance with effects, that brings something into existence. The theatrical model, represented well by Peggy Phelan and Richard Schechner, colleagues at New York University's Department of Performance Studies, regards performance in the light of spectacle, as in a staged event like a ritual, a play, a film, a dance or a sports event, with performers who are more or less distinct from an audience. This approach regards performance as a symbolic form of cultural/artistic expressivity in which a gap opens up between the performer and what or who is being represented. As a representation, performance is a re-*presentation*. "Performances," Schechner writes, "are make-believe, in play, for fun. Or, as Victor Turner said, in the subjunctive mood, the famous 'as if.'" (Schechner, *Performance Theory* xiv). Or, Phelan, in a more Derridean vein in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), speaks of performance in terms of presence/absence. "Performance," she writes, "implicates the real through the presence of living bodies," but these living bodies are forever cut off from what they represent; "the performative is important to Derrida precisely because it displays language's independence from the referent outside of itself" (pp.148–49). Moreover, the performance exists only in present time; it cannot be repeated or copied, since every performance is in itself a unique event. Performance, for Phelan, is "representation without reproduction" (pp.146–66).

Discourses about identity that draw on linguistic and theatrical models of performativity and performance do so in hybridic fashion, insisting on the porous borders between the two and often changing elements of the original models significantly, especially around issues of agency, singularity, and repetition. The ethnographic adaptations examine ways in which everyday life in different cultures are permeated with performances in both the linguistic and theatrical senses of the term – not only the ritual practices of the customs around the life cycle, bodies, food, or dress but also aesthetic and otherwise symbolic representations that characterize given cultures, from "high" and "low" art to sporting events, from stage performances to ritual activities of all kinds. Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* (1988) insists on examining the Theatre within a broadly comparative perspective on the "theatre" of everyday life, an approach directly addressed in his *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985). Anthropologist Michael Taussig, a former colleague of

Schechner and Phelan in the Performance Studies Department at NYU, represents another ethnographic adaptation of performance theory, with his insistence that repetition, not uniqueness, is central to cultural and intercultural identities. In *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), he examines the ongoing processes of intercultural mimesis at the borders between different cultures. In conjunction with the play of alterity in the borderlands, Taussig argues, the powerful drive to imitate leads one group to mime aspects of the other, thus to repeat in a kind of performance what one group sees the other doing. Cultural mimesis is a form of representation, a performance that is repeated. Cultural identity is formed, he writes, as much through repeated mimetic performances of the other as through insistence on difference from the other. Hybridic cultural formations emerge through performative borderland mimesis.

The radical constructivist view of performativity, articulated first by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), blends a Foucauldian/Althusserian determinism with Austin's speech act theory to suggest that subjectivity is constituted through repeated performances as an effect of pre-existing regulatory discourses, like "gender," or "race," or "sexuality." Identity is an *effect* of discourse, not the precursor or creator of it. But rather than emphasize the singularity of the performative speech act as Austin does, Butler suggests that identity is the result of the repetition of discursive acts. In the context of subject or "identity" formation, performativity is a form of "citationality," a repetition or reiteration of norms.

"Performativity," Butler writes, "is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it requires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this is not primarily theatrical" (Butler, 1993: 12). Butler stresses the non-theatrical aspect of this type of performativity because the theatrical suggests some form of pre-existing subject with agency that selects a given performance. Gender performativity, she insists by way of example, does not mean that "one woke in the morning, perused the closet. . . for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night" (Friedman, 1998: x). The anti-humanist bent of her work repudiates the "willful and instrumental subject," the "figure of the choosing subject" (ibid.) that theatrical performativity suggests. In her view, subjects don't chose an identity to perform but are "hailed" into an identity by the regulatory discourses of society.

Drawing on the theatrical model of performance, the oppositional notion of performativity does not foreclose the possibility of agency in the way that Butler's radical constructivist and deterministic position tends to do. Formed within the overlapping contexts of feminist, post-colonial, queer, and race studies, the oppositional performative stresses the way in which a subordinated group parodies or mimics the dominant group. Such imitation in the borders between difference – cultural, racial, gender, sexual, class, and so forth – constitutes a performance with a difference, one that highlights the gap between the two in the form of hybridic representation. Whether consciously intended or not, the effect of this parodic performance is to denaturalize and deauthorize the structure of domination, disclose its social construction, imply the possibility of change – all of which can be read as deliberative or unconscious acts of resistance. Such performativity is inherently subversive, aligned in both form and function with hybridity as a disruptive force.

I have in mind here Luce Irigaray's concept of "mimicry," a form of repetition and "playing with mimesis" that "jam[s] the theoretical machinery" of phallogocentrism; Homi Bhabha's related notion of "colonial mimicry," in which the colonized's imitative performance of the colonizer's culture (as in cricket, for example) undermines the authority of that culture; Houston Baker, whose reading of black minstrelsy suggests the ways in which blacks perform white racist stereotypes as a form of parodic challenge; and various queer theorists such as Butler herself and Sue–Ellen Case who argue that drag, butch/femme role playing, and bisexual play are performative imitations of gender that disclose the social construction of gender and attendant sexualities, thus challenging the "natural" hegemony of the masculine and the heterosexual. The hybrid forms produced through performative mimesis or parody in the borderlands between difference dissolve the fixity of the border in the act of transgressing it.

#### 4. Testing the Talk: Anna Deavere Smith and Gish Jen

What does this conjuncture of border talk, hybridity talk, and performativity talk offer for an understanding of identity in multicultural American writing? Whereas these different rhetorics seem quite distinct, if not contradictory, actual narratives of and about identity often set in motion all three, establishing a fluid borderland where boundaries are frequently transgressed. I turn now to a brief consideration of the reality–based performances of playwright Anna Deavere Smith and the postmodern playfulness of novelist Gish Jen. In different ways, each blends and conjoins the contradictory nature of borders, the different models of hybridity and debates about its cultural politics, and the distinct, even opposing, rhetorics of performance and performativity in cultural theory.

Smith's *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994) are plays that take up the subject of multiracial and cultural violence as they erupted in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in the wake of an accidental killing of a black child by the Lubavitcher rabbi's car and the retaliatory murder of a Hasidic student, and in Los Angeles, during the upheavals that followed the acquittal of the four white policemen whose beating of Rodney King was captured on video. Believing that theatre epitomizes the desire for connection of one difference to another, Smith has developed a method of writing and performing that theatrically highlights the contact zone without obliterating difference. She interviews dozens, indeed hundreds, of people related to the incidents, closely observing their mannerisms, speech, clothes, and body language. Using only their words and a few props, she, as the sole actor in the play, performs a representative sampling of these people, traveling into their bodies and speech, making something happen in the speech act of performing their words. The stage metaphorizes the borderlands, the space in between difference.<sup>5</sup>

Delineating different perspectives on multiracial conflict, her performing body is itself the contact zone, a site for the mimetic performance of hybridity. This enactment of a connection between herself and others destabilizes the very differences she performs. For if she, as an African American woman, can suppress the racial/gender markers of her body to become in performance all these others – man/woman, rich/poor, white/black/Korean/Chicano, professor/minister/rapper/truck driver, and so forth – then how fixed can these differences be? How unpassable is the chasm between?

Performatively speaking, Smith travels to the other, inhabits the other, but does not become the other. The play remains a theatrical performance, an acting out of others, an imitation of others in what Schechner calls the liminal, unstable, and frequently unsettling gap between the actor and the character being acted (Schechner, 1988: xiv). Smith's performances are not seamlessly natural, pretending to a one-to-one correspondence. She sparingly uses clothes, make-up, hair-style changes, and occasional props to suggest the transition from one class to another, one sex to another, one race to another, and so forth. Since she is herself light in color, very tall, and lean, her literal body at times represents a certain racial and sexual ambiguity as it passes through the social meanings of "white," "black," "brown," "yellow," "male" and "female." But she remains on stage, in the video, and in the book's photos ostensibly who she is in the context of a racially divided America, a black woman performing the identities of many others. And, in the stage versions the audience actually watches her migrate from speaker to speaker, donning the identity of others as she puts on their clothes and mannerisms.

Smith's reliance on accents, speech patterns, and mannerisms to indicate her migrations has contributed to the controversy attending her representation of others. Does she reproduce stereotypes of difference, undermining her own good intentions by exaggerating the cultural expressivity of others, making them at times the butt of laughter? (Smith's impersonations of professors like Cornel West and Angela Davis gently parody the tendency toward abstraction, posturing, and pomposity of academics, an occupational class to which Smith herself partially belongs.) Or does this parodic element in her performances function in Bhabha's terms as a form of mimicry that denaturalizes cultural identities by calling attention to the performer's artifice? Tania Modleski situates Smith's performances in the tradition of minstrelsy "because she plays so close to the edges of caricature, sometimes pulling back in time and sometimes not" (Modleski, 1997: 65). Such mimicry can be transgressive, Modleski writes in partial agreement with Bhabha, but she worries that it also "reduces people to stereotypes and robs them of their complexity" (ibid.: 65).

I think in contrast that Smith's play with caricature draws attention to the stylization and (stereo)typing that underlies cultural identity itself. Parody – and the laughter it sometimes evokes – unsettles, disturbs, creates through irony a certain distance between the Smith-the-actor and her monologists. One effect of this mimicry is to make visible the way in which the identities of difference to which people often cling are performances. And performances, like culture itself, can and do change. As Richard Pearce writes, "the dramatic changing from character to character" especially evident in the stage versions literalizes the space in between difference. "We see that she never really" fully inhabits or "becomes a character but is always representing it, convincingly but with a difference." In her "travels" she always retains "something of her original self."

Structuring speaking, Smith's plays travel across boundaries between identities by tacking back and forth between sharply juxtaposed differences that often emphasize the chasm of misunderstanding between sides at the same time that they suggest parallels of sameness. For example, *Fires in the Mirror* opens with a series of scenes about race and ethnicity in New York City that serve as a broader context for the specific conflict between African Americans and Jews in Crown Heights. One series of three scenes is entitled "Hair" and features the monologues of an Anonymous Girl (a black high school student), the Reverend Al Sharpton, and Rivkah Siegal (a Lubavitcher housewife). All reflect upon the meaning of hair as a cultural marker of their identity, in

monologues that demonstrate the performative and imitative dimensions of hair arrangement that reflect and "hail" them into certain recognizable cultural identities.

The Anonymous Girl talks about hair styles in her high school, reflecting the tensions among Puerto Rican, Dominican, and North American black girls who variously copy or refuse to copy each other's hair styles and ape or resist the behavior of white girls. Sharpton explains why he straightens his hair, not to copy white people but to honor his surrogate father, James Brown, who took him one day to a beauty parlor to have it done. "So it's certainly not/ a reaction to Whites./ It's me and James's thing," he insists defiantly (22). Rivkah Siegel comes next, explaining her pained ambivalence about her decision to follow the Lubavitcher tradition for women to hide their hair beneath a wig: "I mean, I've gone through a lot with wearing wigs and not/ wearing/ wigs./ It's been a big issue for me" (25). Thus, Smith performs the difference hair makes in the different individual, gendered, and ethnic/racial/religious groups to which the three speakers multiply belong. A common thread of anxiety about hair and its relation to their group identities runs through all three accounts, a parallel bond and potential basis of connection that actor and audience can experience, but not the characters themselves. Smith, and the audience along with her, travel back and forth to a multiplicity of selves, a journey the characters themselves do not take.

Smith's plays testify to the very power of fixed identity politics at the same time that her performance transcends that fixity by encompassing multiple others. In the imaginary space of a public theatre (video or book), the liminal in between differences comes into being, moving beyond the ethnic absolutism or the isolated understandings of the people occupying historical space. The contradictory poetics underlying Smith's performative play with identities encompasses both a visionary hope for healing connection and testimony to real division. This migratory dialogic between identification and difference constitutes Smith's particular twilight zone, a hybridic borderland built out of the performative interaction of differences.

Gish Jen's ethnically irreverent romp through identity questions in multicultural America in *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) works with the same issues that Smith raises, but in the context of *Bildung* narrative set in the wealthy New York suburban space of 1968, not in settings of violent ethnic confrontation of the 1990s. Like Smith, the second generation Chinese American writer probes the utopic and real dimensions of connection and hybridic imitation across racial, cultural, religious, gender, and class divides. Far more playful than Smith, however, Jen revels in ethnic parody and caricature to shatter the pieties of ethnic absolutism at the same time that she satirizes postmodern free play disconnected from historical reference. Jen's mimicry occupies a liminal space in between fundamentalist identity politics and poststructuralist dismantling of identity per se, as the seeming freedom that American promises of absolute choice is repeatedly undermined by the return of repressed histories of ethnicity, race, immigration, slavery, anti-semitism, and sexism.

Ventriloquizing the irreverently innocent easy-speak of teenage America to establish a performative gap between the tongue-in-cheek writer and her wisely naive protagonist, Jen narrates the *Bildung* of Mona Chang, following her life from 8th grade through her high school graduation, with an epilogue that takes place after college and the birth of her child, just before her marriage to her high school lover, with its fantasized name change from Chang to

Changowitz. With her best friend, the wealthy Jewish girl named Barbara Gugelstein, Mona grows up Asian American in Scarshill, where her immigrant parents have opened a House of Pancakes restaurant (a play on the stereotype that all Chinese Americans not working in laundries are involved in the Chinese restaurant business). In her search for an adult American identity distinct from that of her parents, Mona has a crush on a boy from Japan who rejects her because she can never become Japanese, converts to Judaism over the objections of her mother, falls in love with Seth (a Jewish high school grad who acts out his rebellion by living in a tepee in his parents' back yard), tries to help Alfred (the homeless African American cook at her family's restaurant) and his friends, and leaves home when conflict with her parents worsens. Angry with her father's favoritism of his Chinese staff and discriminatory treatment of his black employees, Mona breaks family loyalty and tells Alfred why he doesn't get the promotion he deserves.

Complicating the scenario of secrets and confessions, Alfred carries on a secret affair with Barbara's cousin Evie while he lives hidden in her house. An old tunnel from the Underground Railroad allows him to move in and out of the house undetected. When Barbara's parents return from a summer abroad to uncover the multiple plots, Mona's father fires Alfred, who promptly sues the family, armed with information Mona has given him. Mona's mother slaps and rejects her for betraying her family ("Fort Chang"), which leads Mona to run away, wandering from coast to coast. Upon her return, she convinces Alfred to drop the suit by apologizing to him for her own and Barbara's racism in suspecting him of stealing, and goes home with relief, only to find her mother refusing to acknowledge her presence. Here, on this completely unresolved note, the novel ends. The epilogue supplements the story of family fragmentation with a conventional comedic scene of reconciliation and marriage. Only here, the restitution of the social and familial order is intercultural. Alfred marries Evie, and Mona marries Seth, after the birth of their daughter Io. Just as the wedding begins, Mona's estranged mother appears, her presence signalling her acceptance (if not her blessing) of her Chinese/Jewish/American daughter. The mother–daughter plot overwhelms the marriage plot as Mona and Helen embrace with a clapping baby Io at their side. As a product of cultural and biological mixing, Io signifies the new American, the hybridic future.

The plot is elaborate, convoluted, improbable – a clear transgression against the conventions of verisimilitude at the same time that it borrows from popular culture clichés of family melodrama and racial/ethnic stereotyping. The familiar linear story of young adult love, rebellion, and initiation holds the narrative together. But the plot's underlying *donnée* is the question of identity in the borderlands between differences of all kinds. Scene after scene either stages a performance of intercultural encounter or makes those differences the focal point of dialogue and action. The conventional tropes of teenage *Bildung*, the transparent simplicity of the narrative voice, and the linear chronology borrow heavily from the conventions of the realist novel. But parodic irony, satiric exaggeration, and mimicry of stereotypes give the novel a decidedly postmodern flair. The text both thematizes and acts out the performative dimensions of communal identities.

"What in the world is an Asian American?" Mona asks in the novel's coda (301). Even the book's cover plays games with identity, overtly celebrating difference as it more covertly fuses and challenges them with all three modes of hybridity. The photocollage superimposes a bagel (is it whole wheat?) on top of a dish of soup noodles. The eyes and nose of an Asian woman peek

through the bagel hole. The author's Chinese name on the bagel makes one think both woman and soup must be Chinese too. But the noodles are actually Japanese udon, not Chinese, and the face, who is it? Its racial marking as "not white" is clear, but its cultural marking? Chinese? Japanese? Korean? of perhaps, the "new" American? The soup plays off the familiar image of the melting pot and the more recent images of American multiculturalism, like stir-fry. But like the novel, it plays with the possibility of new hybridities and the always already hybridized nature of identity.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In sum, the work of Anna Devere Smith and Gish Jen conjoin the seemingly disparate rhetorics of contemporary cultural theory about identity – border talk, hybridity talk, and performativity talk. Both engage in a performative play 'beyond' pure difference, not for the purposes of pure fun, although each uses humor incisively in the service of a serious project. Well-attuned to the performative nature of cultural constructs like race, class, ethnicity, religion, and gender, they remain sensitive to questions of power, not removing their play with signification from historical reference and material effects. Both write against the hegemony of pure difference, without erasing the significance of difference for identity. Both perform a hybridity that throws into question the fixity of borders between difference. Both express the utopian leanings of hybridity talk on the one hand and examine the everyday realities of cultural mixing on the other. Mimesis as either performative imitation or as representation is central to both writers as they explore the contact zone between differences. At a meta-theoretical level, their narratives about cultural borders are themselves borderlands where contesting positions blend and clash in a richly textured theoretical hybridity.

As playwright and novelist, Anna Devere Smith and Gish Jen are creators of fiction, practitioners of narrative, impresarios of imaginative performance. There are not cultural theorists per se, and their work eludes the confines and demands for consistency of analytic discourse. As such, their work is full of excesses—domains of ambiguity, contradiction, and play—and should not be reduced to theoretical axioms. Nonetheless, their creative works are a performative enactment of theory. They theorize cultural identity in ways that have much to teach those of us who practice in the field of cultural theory. In this regard, what is striking about the performative narratives of Smith and Jen is the degree to which they set in collaborative and hybridic play the full range of overlapping theories about borders, hybridity, and performance. Positions which in theoretical texts often appear to be in conflict reappear in Smith's and Jen's work in collaborative interplay.

Perhaps it is the nature of theoretical debate itself, the dialogic and agonistic nature of theoretical practice. Whatever its cause, theorists tend to be a tribal lot—taking sides, acting out sectarian differences, and balkanizing fields with ever more precise delineations of distinction. This tendency in the cultural practice of theory-making intensifies when theorists address the issue of identity itself. Primed to hunt for difference as the cornerstone of analytic modes of thought, theorists of culture (both the *Culture* of creative representations and the culture of everyday life) often foreground differences among cultural groups and mute the heterogeneity of these groups as well as the borderlands of intercultural mixing between them. Creative works of the imagination like *Twilight* and *Mona in the Promised Land* suggest a way out of the impasses in which we cultural theorists often become mired. Their performances of fluidity, their enactments of spaces in between difference at

the very time their fictions explore the very meaning of difference for cultural groups, offer a kind of model by example. They suggest ways in which theorists can bring into visibility the contradictory, interactive, and fluid borderlands our work has too often ignored. Anna Deveare Smith and Gish Jen do so while maintaining a firm grasp on the impact of historical injustice and inequity in creating institutionally and ideologically inflected differences among cultural groups. Like them, we can move beyond melting pots that eradicate difference and mosaics that enshrine it into a twilight zone of contradiction and possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on analyses of border and hybridity discourses developed in *Mappings* (Friedman, 1998, esp. 3–14, 67–104, 151–78) and aims to develop beyond *Mappings* how discourses of performance and performativity in discussions of identity relate to the rhetorics of borders and intercultural mixing. I am grateful to the following audiences for their challenges to various versions of this essay: International Conference on Narrative, Northwestern University, April, 1998; MELUS (Multi–Ethnic Literature of the United States) Conference, Vanderbilt University, March 1999; National Chiao–Tung University, Hsin–Chu, Taiwan, June 1999; Tufts University, March 2000; and Centro de Estudos Sociais, University of Coimbra, Portugal, May 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Anzaldúa's utopian strain comes out most clearly in her articulation of the new mestiza consciousness: "The work of the *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject–object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, violence, of war" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 80). Echoing Virginia Woolf's famous disclaimer in *Three Guineas*, she continues, "As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yes all countries are mind because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male–derived beliefs of Indo–Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world. . . ." (ibid.: 80–81).

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of and citations for border discourses in cultural theory, see Friedman, 1998, esp. pp. 3–13, 67–104, and 243n1.

<sup>4</sup> For extended discussion of and citations for discourses of hybridity in cultural theory, as well as a reading of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* in relation to this rhetoric, see Friedman, 1998: 82–104.

- <sup>5</sup> In the text versions of both plays, Smith lineates the words of the monologists like poems, which in part mark performative pauses, gaps, and speech rhythms and in part reminds readers of her intervention as writer. Smith deletes some of what her interviewees say, but she insists that all the words were actually spoken to her.
- <sup>6</sup> The cover I describe here is the original hardback cover; subsequent paper editions of the novel feature the same partial Asian face as one block in an Andy Warhol–inspired grid of multiple American flags.

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