

Hybridity and Whiteness in Claudine C. O'Hearn's Half and Half: Writings on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural

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Heather Latimer,

"Hybridity and Whiteness in Claudine C. O'Hearn's *Half and Half: Writings on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural*"

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Abstract: In her paper, "Hybridity and Whiteness in Claudine C. O'Hearn's *Half and Half: Writings on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural*," Heather Latimer examines the autobiographical collection *Half and Half: Writings on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural* assembled and edited by Claudine C. O'Hearn. Latimer's analysis reveals how current models of hybridity theory are performed, articulated, and exemplified in the texts of O'Hearn's volume. In her analysis, Latimer explores the anxiety and tension about whiteness within hybridity theory, often reflected in the performance of hybrid aesthetics. Latimer argues that while some authors in *Half and Half* avoid talking about whiteness as a way to establish legitimate hybrid identities, this avoidance actually reinscribes an authenticity to their identities which in turn replicates the very oppressive processes of identity formation they are attempting to write against. Latimer sees other authors in the volume, however, as disrupting the stability and invisibility of whiteness by performing a type of hybridity that makes visible the made-up and constructed nature of all racial identities.

Heather LATIMER

Hybridity and Whiteness in Claudine C. O'Hearn's *Half and Half: Writings on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural*

In an increasingly globalized and culturally "mixed" world it is becoming impossible to define ourselves under any stable category of cultural purity or authenticity, either nationally or internationally. As traditional categories and binaries of racial and cultural identity are blurred, more people are defining themselves as "hyphenated" and/or within the discourse of hybridity, and cultural critics and theorists have begun to examine how this so-called new hybridity is performed and articulated. In these attempts, critics such as Robert Young, Rita de Grandis, and Sneja Gunew have noted that although hybridity theory often focuses on poststructuralist notions of fluid identities and liminal spaces, concepts around "the hybrid" are actually linked to and arise out of historical legacies of racism, colonization, and imperialism. The theory, therefore, finds itself in the middle of (and pushing against) age-old debates surrounding monocultural identities and "embedded in older tensions between nationalist sentiments and articulations of world citizenship that have operated globally through one of the earliest ideologies of internationalism, that of empire" (Joseph 1). From this tenuous spot, hybridity theorists and hybrid groups attempt to establish a third space — aesthetically, geographically and psychologically — that gestures beyond traditional oppositions and identity categories as a way to interrupt "the seamless narrative of oppressed and oppressor, colonized and colonizer" (Joseph 9). In defining themselves against current binary structures, however, those who seek to create this third space often have no choice but to produce themselves as legitimate, unique and (purely) different in order to be taken seriously and politically. This has led to a certain level of anxiety and tension within hybridity theory which is often visible and reflected in the performance of hybrid aesthetics. For instance, in the autobiographical collection *Half and Half: Writings on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural* (Ed. Claudine C. O'Hearn) the authors attempt to write this third space and assert hybrid mixed-race identities. In these assertions, however, the authors also struggle with how to incorporate whiteness into their identities and even actively ignore and abject their whiteness to the point it becomes a noticeable site of anxiety within their work.

The topic of whiteness has been theorized extensively by feminist and cultural critics such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Robert Young, Richard Dyer, and Ruth Frankenberg. These theorists posit that race shapes white and non-white people's lives in several ways and that whiteness is not only a "location of structural advantage" but more importantly "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg 1). For instance, in *White*, Richard Dyer reflects on the tendency to leave whiteness unmarked by examining how work on race and racism often leaves whiteness invisible. In assuming that whites are "non-raced" (2), Dyer states that many people and scholars actually end up configuring white people as "just people," which actually states implicitly that "whites are people whereas other colors are something else" (2). This configuring stops anti-racism work from reaching its ultimate goal of "a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant" (3); not only does white supremacy currently rely on whiteness being left unseen, it is actually only maintained through this invisibility. This reliance, in turn, creates a situation where racial identity is mistakenly seen as not as important to white people's lives as those who are racialized, which reinforces a binary where "blackness [for instance] is conflated with being oppressed, and whiteness is conflated with the privilege of 'normalcy'" (Twine 228). Whiteness is often left as the (invisible) center to a racial politics that is supposed to be based on ideas "of multiple identities, of hybridity, of decenteredness and fragmentation" (Dyer 2). Further, whiteness itself is often seen as problematically uncontested and monolithic, even by some of the very hybridity theorists who note how it functions as this (invisible) center. Whiteness may be identified as being unmarked and unnamed, but it is still often imagined as a unified, stable and central category of identity formation for both whites and non-whites.

Many of the authors in *Half and Half* confront various forms of whiteness and in the case of David Mura whiteness very much acts as the invisible center in his autobiographical story. In "Reflections on my Daughter" Mura — a self-identified Japanese-American — talks about his relationship with his white wife, his mixed-race daughter, and his "problematic sexual desire for white women and for pornography" (81). He examines his own psychological and social desire for marriage with a white woman and talks of his fear that their daughter, Samantha, will encounter the same racism as he has as she grows up. In describing what he tells his daughter about both her race and culture, Mura admits he does not "talk to her much about how she is both Japanese American and European American" (85) and often neglects the white side of her identity because he "wishes for things to be simpler, to say that since Samantha looks mainly Asian, this is how society views her, this is how she will be treated, this is what I have to prepare her for" (85-86). Here, as in other times within Mura's story, it is obvious that he struggles with how to reconcile his daughter's mixed background with the political and social reality that she will be seen by others not only as "mixed" or "hybrid," but also, of course, as a child of color; others will not see her whiteness and he is not sure yet how he or she should. Mura also notes that the decision to focus on teaching his daughter about her Japanese-American heritage is not only his own, but that his "Wasp" wife feels it is "just as important", as they can already assume that she "will learn about [her] Wasp [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant] background, since that background is deeply embedded in the school curriculum and the mainstream media" (88). This assumption, however, creates tension in Mura's text, as he repeatedly states that he is not sure if he and his wife are teaching Samantha the appropriate things about being part white. This leads him to question whether she will "one day accuse [them] of teaching her to neglect her Wasp background? Will she find silences and gaps?" (88). In fact, by assuming that Samantha will learn about her "Wasp background" through the media and mainstream culture, Mura leaves whiteness an (invisible) center to Samantha's identity, since being infiltrated by the apparent normalcy of Wasp culture is not the same as deconstructing whiteness or questioning white privilege -- a privilege Samantha will both confront and enact in various ways throughout her life through her race, class, gender, and sexuality. Mura leaves white and "Wasp culture" as a set of unmarked, unnamed and naturalized cultural practices in Samantha's life, which in turn reinforces the very binary he is trying to deconstruct: white as a state of privilege and Japanese-American as a state of oppression. Partly in response to this tension, Mura teaches his daughter that she is part-Jewish on her white side and introduces his daughter to the history of the interment camps and the Holocaust. However, the fact that Samantha "seizes on ... her Jewish background as another mark of difference and as something special" (89) allows Mura to further avoid talking about whiteness, as suddenly whiteness and Jewishness become two very distinct categories of identity; just as he teaches her that Japanese-American and European-American are distinct categories. While this separation of Samantha's heritage into separate compartments is intended to allow her to become proud of her hybrid and racialized identity, Mura's avoidance of how these compartments are interconnected actually keeps whiteness the (invisible) central aspect of his daughter's identity. Whiteness becomes the reference point he defines his daughter's cultural and racial background against.

In "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to do with it?" Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty point out how both avoidance of whiteness and studies on whiteness have the potential to "unwittingly leave the terms of West/East, white/nonwhite polarities intact" (193). Taking feminist politics as their reference, Martin and Mohanty investigate how critiques of white feminism and whiteness itself paradoxically often start from the premise that Western feminist discourse is (obviously) inadequate to women of color or Third World women. This leads to a "repeated failure to contest the feigned homogeneity of the West" (193) and contest the feigned homogeneity of the whiteness often conflated with the West. In a similar manner, Garret Hongo's critique of white America in "Lost in Place" unwittingly reinforces the feigned homogeneity of white suburbia by beginning from the premise that his home in Eugene, Oregon, is obviously inadequate in providing a comfortable space for him as an Asian-American. Hongo opens "Lost in Place" by describing a birthday party and his realization that: "Except for my two sons, the hair on all of the other boys was blond. Shiny yellow blond, strawberry blond, dirty-dishwater blond or towheaded blond, but

blond. No one else seemed bothered by this or even to notice — not my wife, who is brunette, not my in-laws, who are also brown-haired. But it drove me into an instant panic. And I began to feel angry" (2). Here, as in most of the story, Hongo immediately associates physical attributes, such as hair color and skin color, to racial identity and sets up a situation where he and his mixed-race sons are seen as lost in a "sea of whiteness" represented by the blond-haired boys at the birthday party. While Hongo's panic stems from the material reality that he and his sons are the target of racism and cultural isolation through their residence in (a mostly white) Eugene, Hongo seems incapable of imagining race as anything other than a biological reality which leaves him and his sons in a position of constant racial marginalization. While it is obvious that he actually is marginalized racially and that this is an incredibly real and painful experience, Hongo's focus on the physical and biological factors of race works both to reinscribe old "scientific" notions of the reality of race and reinforce the idea that the whiteness of Eugene is somehow monolithic and stable. As well, Hongo sidesteps how his white wife plays a part in this marginalization or how his sons's positions as hybrid, or mixed-race, complicate the dichotomy of white and non-white. For instance, he describes his wife as brown-haired, as if that makes her less "white" than the blond-haired boys, and he associates his wife's whiteness with her Mennonite heritage, which he describes as both a "religious sect and an ethnic group" (8). Interestingly, this interrogation/ complication/ deconstruction of his wife's whiteness actually aligns her as an outsider to the Eugene community with Hongo, yet he seems unable to interrogate the apparent homogeneity of the rest of the white community in the same manner. As he states, his children are growing up in a community that is "all white" (4) which makes him fear that they will not know how to relate to him or "know about others" (4). As Martin and Mohanty describe this fear is related to a relationship that exists "between the loss of community and the loss of self ... to the extent that identity is collapsed with home and community" (209). However, while Martin and Mohanty insist on recognizing the ways that home and identity connect to "unstable positions within systems of oppression" (209) and call for an analysis of whiteness which refuse the "all-too-easy polemic that opposes victims and perpetrators" (209), Hongo is unable to realize these complications and instead shifts his anxieties and fears onto the white population of Eugene: "It was the ignorance and social homogeneity up here that was the cause if all of this" (7). Further, by leaving the white community as a powerful center/ whole and placing himself as the completely marginalized other, Hongo sidesteps "the political stakes concealed in such equations" (Martin and Mohanty 195) and refuses to come to terms with the possibility that his own racial identity is also hybrid and unstable and may even stem from defining himself against a white center. Hongo is unable to step outside a white and nonwhite binary even as he attempts to talk about his sons's hybridity.

There is a critical link between hybridity theory and autobiographical writing which contributes to the tension involving whiteness in *Half and Half*. In "The Secrets of Ethnic Abjection," Rey Chow examines this tension and notes that although hybridity theory may posit a positive, poststructuralist, emancipatory idea of difference "there is a certain rift between the laudable theorizations of difference, on the one hand, and the numerous sociocultural and/or geopolitical situations in which difference has led not so much to emancipation as to oppression" (135). This "rift," as Chow describes, leaves "a distinctive affective dissonance between theoretical writings" and "fictional and autobiographical writings" (135) such as *Half and Half*. This "affective dissonance" is the result of a "temporal disjunction" (136) between theory and autobiography which stems from the way that hybridity theory, for instance, tends to look to a positive future with an "anticipatory mode of speech" (136), while autobiographical writing by hybrid subjects, on the other hand, is based on a "life remembered" (136) and uses a mode of speech that looks backward at "the nature of injustice" (136). This tendency to look backwards is part of what Chow calls "coercive mimeticism" (138) and is connected to how ethnic/racialized/hybrid subjects often write "confessions about themselves, in what may be called self-mimicry" (138) or self-appropriation in an attempt to come to terms with the legacies of racism they carry. Related to this coercive mimeticism, and self-mimicry, is the constructed nature of ethnic autobiography itself, which is often a narcissistic attempt to create a loving "image or reflection" (104) of one's self or ethnicity within a mainstream which, in turn, refuses to acknowledge such ethnic representations and repeatedly thwarts such

attempts. This thwarting leads to a situation where "every interaction with the social order at large by necessity turns into a painful reminder of this process of suppression and wounding" (141) so that the narcissistic desire (need) is never met or developed and the authors become trapped in self-mimicry. Further, since ethnic autobiographies are often also used as/seen as/constructed as writings which speak for the minority communities as well as the authors, this narcissistic need becomes "a transindividual issue of attachment and belonging" (141). For instance, the act of writing under the label "Asian American," as Garrett Hongo does, immediately puts Hongo in the position of speaking not only about himself but also about the "Asian American experience" -- an experience that is rarely reflected in mainstream representations of American culture. This leaves Hongo in a "symptomatic attempt (born of coercive mimeticism and social interpellation, to be sure) to create access to a transindividual narcissism -- to grope for a 'self-regard' that does not exist yet" (142). Therefore, even as Hongo's takes hybridity, and a hybrid historical context, as his point of departure in "Lost in Place," rather than valorizing hybridity "what we discover is ... ambivalence, anger, pain, melancholy, shame and abjection" (138). This pain and abjection shows itself clearly in the anxiety that surrounds whiteness and ruptures Hongo's text. Hongo is unable to create the transindividual narcissism he needs and desires and uses/falls back on/relies on traditional binaries of white and non-white to make sense of his situation.

Chow states that for authors who write about the actual experience of living as cultural hybrids, "hybridity itself ... becomes for these ethnically marked writers a form of existential entrapment" (146) so that "ethnic hybridity is itself a form of abjection" (148). She asks: "What kind of an autobiography is possible with abjects" (148)? And answers that the only one possible is violent autobiography "haunted by and trapped within the given of abject hybridity" (152). This type of autobiography, in turn, can only "bring about further humiliation and self-loathing" (152) and will (apparently) never be able to close the gap that the "temporal disjunction" and "affective dissonance" between hybridity theory and personal writing creates. Lisa See's "The Funeral Banquet," however, does arguably just that. It not only manages to subvert an abject hybridity, but actually creates ambivalence, abjection and tension within the reader as well. From the opening paragraph of "The Funeral Banquet," See purposefully and creatively plays with a deliberate racial tension by describing her recently deceased white grandmother as Chinese: "My grandmother made sure that I learned Chinese traditions ... [she] believed in this order of the world, for she lived as a Chinese wife, Chinese daughter-in-law, Chinese mother, Chinese grandmother, and Chinese great-grandmother. But Stella Copeland See was Caucasian" (125-26). In describing her grandmother as "more 'Chinese' than most Chinese" (126) or as becoming "Chinese not through her heritage or her blood but through her being" (127) See sets up a (purposefully) unstable divide between "race" and "culture" which draws readers' attention to their own assumptions about how they define whiteness and Chineseness. See refuses to conflate race with culture and dares readers to do the same. Further, she also draws attention to the fact that both culture and race are constructed and performative; what is often identified as race and linked to biological factors is actually a set of social concepts and practices. See's grandmother reflects this performativity through her "fierce tenacity" (126) in "becoming" Chinese. For See, then, her grandmother is both white and Chinese and these two (apparently) incongruent identities not only co-exist together in a hybrid state, but also provide the basis or model for how See constructs her own Chinese identity. For instance, as See describes sitting in her grandmother's home and unpacking her grandmother's things she acknowledges that her grandmother: "had first created her identity through material goods: her first Chinese necklace, her first pair of baggy black pants. The power of those objects sank into her, became part of her until she became part of them. I think that from the time when she took me around at those wedding banquets she understood that my identity, my sense of self, would have to be constructed from the outside in" (135). This model of constructing her identity from "the outside in" allows See to realize that although she (See) may look white, she does not have to embody whiteness, nor the set of unmarked and unnamed cultural practices associated with whiteness (Frankenberg 1). Instead, she can attempt to occupy and play with a type of performative hybridity, which is both white and Chinese and allows for the "self-conscious, free and participatory performance of personhood" (Joseph 5). See further states that she hopes her own children

will one day follow her model and come to her home to "begin their own excavation project into [her] life and those of [their] ancestors so that they, too, might discover — remember — who and what they are" (138). This concept — discovering as a route to remembering — further complicates any stable or traditional idea of See's identity formation, as she not only attempts to "reclaim the past and put it in direct relationship with the present" (Munoz 118), but actually create the past by discovering the present. See understands that she will never be able to access a lost or essentialized cultural past for herself and that culture (like the past, like her grandmother's Chineseness, like race, like whiteness) is really, therefore, only one bit in the many factors that constitute the matrix that is hybridity (Munoz 119).

In her attempts to live with a hybrid white/Chinese identity, See notes that she often causes panic and anxiety in other white people and states that she sees this as a result of people not understanding "why anyone would chose to be other than white" or "forsake the inherent privilege that being white allows us in this country [America]" (136). The fact that See is able to embody the type of hybridity she does (look white while identifying as Chinese) and the discomfort this hybridity causes in other people, however, is very much connected to white privilege. Dyer, for instance, notes that white privilege relies on white people not being able to see "anything that accounts for [their] position of privilege and power. This is itself crucial to the security with which [they] occupy that position" (9). Lisa See's insistence that she is Chinese when she looks white, therefore, is a blatant exposure of white power and privilege, as she makes her whiteness hyper visible through the (absurd) denial that she is not white and makes her privilege obvious through the performance and subversion of this privilege in various ways. Obviously, the fact that See is seen as white by others means that See is able to call herself "Chinese at heart" (136) without losing any of the privileges of whiteness. Nevertheless, she subverts these privileges to a great extent by drawing constant attention to them, thereby rendering them visible and rupturing the security inherent in their invisibility. For instance, when she notes that she is able to confuse people in her lectures by pointing out that she is "still an aberration, but in another ten, twenty, thirty years, Americans will look at each other and — just like they do with me now — really not know who someone is by their face," she performs a type of whiteness which is both visible and "strange" (Dyer 10); she draws attention to the fact that people don't know what she is if she is not white and perhaps, therefore, do not know what whiteness is at all. This estranging of herself, in turn, upsets the stability of whiteness and focuses attention onto the fact that it is because whiteness is usually so naturalized in mainstream culture that confronting See's Chineseness is both uncomfortable and completely disruptive. See effectively performs a type of hyperwhiteness which is also a type of disidentification, since her performance of both whiteness and Chineseness somehow do "not line up" (Munoz 113) and we are unable to identify her wholly in either category. This disidentification, or disjuncture, in turn, reflects the "complexities and impossibilities of identity" (Munoz 114) and reflects the bizarre paradox of whiteness in which whites must be seen as "white enough" to enact privilege, but are only able to maintain that privilege by keeping whiteness invisible.

See, like many hybridity theorists and authors, draws attention to how "modern culture produces hybrids while at the same time attempting to elide or erase representations or signs of hybridity" (Munoz 114-15). Her success in overcoming the abject hybridity that Chow outlines, however, does stem from the fact that she is seen as white by mainstream society and, unlike Garrett Hongo or David Mura for instance, does not have to "grope for a 'self-regard' that does not exist yet" (Chow 142). Rather, See is able to move through whiteness and become hyperwhite precisely because of the social and psychological status her whiteness affords her; the ambiguity of her cultural and racial identity is a space of movement rather than abjection. Speaking from a more marginal position, however, Danzy Senna, in "The Mulatto Millennium," confronts this ambiguity in another way. Instead of turning towards a sort-of hyper identity, Senna enacts a "strategic anti-anti-essentialism" (Anderson qtd. in Ang 196) in response to her hybridity and to whiteness. Senna begins "The Mulatto Millennium" by stating: "Before all this racial ambiguity, I was a black girl ... not your ordinary black girl, if such a thing exists. But rather, a black girl with a WASP mother and a black-Mexican father, and a face that harkens to Andalusia, not Africa. I was born in 1970 when

'black' described a people bonded not by shared complexion or hair texture but by shared history" (15). Here, Senna immediately identifies herself as racially hybrid, but is quick to point out that as she grew up she saw herself firmly as black — culturally, politically and psychologically. As she states, she used to sneer "at those byproducts of miscegenation who chose to identify as mixed, not black. I thought it wishy-washy, an act of flagrant assimilation, treason, passing even" (15). So, she identified "as black not as a pseudoscientific rule but as a conscious choice" (16). This conscious choice leads Senna to perform a certain type of blackness that is connected to a politics in which she not only identifies with a black community, but also resists the disempowerment that can ensue from being categorized as hybrid by asserting a coherent, unambiguously black identity "founded on a political claim of historical community and memory, not biology" (Ang 196). Further, Senna uses her identification with blackness and her appearance of whiteness strategically to make whiteness apparent to others by "spying" on white people and "blend[ing] into their crowd, [to] let them think [she is] one of them, and then listen as they talk in smug disdain about black folks" (17). This active disidentification with her whiteness allows Senna to perform a similar strategic action as See's hyperwhiteness. Like See, Senna is able to draw attention to how the invisibility of white privilege works. However, in this case Senna blends into whiteness strategically and then waits for white racism and privilege to reveal itself before "springing it on them [white people]," telling them who she really is, and watching "in a kind of pained glee as their faces [go] from eggshell white, to hot mama crimson, to *The Color Purple*" (18). Unlike See, however, Senna is only able to make whiteness apparent by using her own shame and "ethnic abjection" and then shifting this into white guilt. This prompts Senna to hold back from attaching herself prematurely to a "model of interracial harmony and 'reconciliation', of happy hybridity" (Ang 197) and state that there is a "danger in this muddy middle stance. A danger of disappearing. Of being swallowed by the great white whale" (18). Whether she admits so or not, however, Senna does perform her hybridity. In fact, by placing herself in these white situations and springing it on people that she is actually black, she uses her presence physically as a way to interrogate hegemonic white definitions of blackness by literally interjecting these definitions with herself: "with blackness" (Ang 198). In the same way that Ien Ang describes speaking "Black British" (198) — as a mode of self-representation where articulations of Britishness which are seen as essentially white are "rearticulated in an impure and plural formation which can no longer suppress the black other within" (198) — Senna interjects herself into these white situations and uses her blackness as a way to integrate and confront whiteness. Her hybridity, therefore, is used and enacted as "a sign of challenge and altercation, not of congenial amalgamation or merger" (Ang 198). Although Senna is unable to configure this gesture in terms of hybridity, and even goes so far as to mock hybridity throughout "The Mulatto Millennium," it is the slipperiness and fluidity of her racial and cultural identities that allows Senna to attack and interrogate whiteness head-on. However, it is through her use of strategic anti-anti-essentialism and her refusal to rely on a so-called biological identity (her disidentification with whiteness and hybridity, really) that Senna is able to mark whiteness in this way.

Ang states that hybridity is not only about fluidity and liminality, but also about friction and conflict. It is "about ambivalence and incommensurability, about contestations and interrogations that go hand in hand with the heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity we have to deal with as we live together-in-difference" (200). One of the ways that this tension of "living together-in-difference" is reflected is in the various ways that the authors of *Half and Half* address whiteness. Some authors, such as Mura and Hongo, avoid whiteness as a way to establish legitimate hybrid identities. This avoidance actually reinscribes a certain purity and authenticity to their identities which in turn replicates the very oppressive processes of identity formation they are attempting to write against. Despite their best intentions whiteness is actually reinforced. Other authors, such as See and Senna, however, reveal that whiteness as a way to disrupt its stability and invisibility and bridge the "affective dissonance" or rift that Chow describes. Playing with the double-edged paradox of hybridity (where fluid identities and liminal spaces often run head-on into legacies of racism and colonization), the four authors of *Half and Half* perform their hybridity in ways that make visible the made-up and constructed nature of all racial and cultural identities.

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