

Bhabha's Hybridity and the Third Space in Postcolonial Discourse

I have recently become interested in postcolonial studies (Ashcroft *et al* 1989; During 1990; Mishra 1991; Sholat 1992; Ashcroft 1995; Rajan 1995) and the broader discourse of cultural studies. (Grossberg 1992) In particular I have been intrigued with Homi K. Bhabha, a leading figure in contemporary cultural discourse, whose theory of cultural difference provides us with the conceptual vocabulary of *hybridity* and the *third space*. (Rutherford 1990; Bhabha 1994; Bhabha 1996)

The history of hybridity has caused some to consider the employment of the concept as problematic, indeed, offensive. (Mitchell 1997; Werbner 1997) In colonial discourse, hybridity is a term of abuse for those who are products of miscegenation, mixed-breeds. It is imbued in nineteenth-century eugenicist and scientific-racist thought. (Young 1995) Despite this loaded historical past, Papastergiadis reminds us of the emancipative potential of negative terms. He poses the question "should we use only words with a pure and inoffensive history, or should we challenge essentialist models of identity by taking on and then subverting their own vocabulary." (Papastergiadis 1997: 258)

In fact the concept of hybridity occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse. It is "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference." (Hoogvelt 1997: 158) This is particularly so in Bhabha's discussion of cultural hybridity.

Bhabha has developed his concept of hybridity from literary and cultural theory to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity. (Bhabha 1994; Bhabha 1996) For Bhabha, hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (the *Other*) within a singular universal framework, but then fails producing something familiar but new. (Papastergiadis 1997) Bhabha contends that a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and colonised challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity. Hybridity is positioned as antidote to essentialism, or "the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity." (Fuss, 1991: xi). In postcolonial discourse, the notion that any culture or identity is pure or essential is disputable. (Ashcroft *et al* 1995) Bhabha himself is aware of the dangers of fixity and fetishism of identities within binary colonial thinking arguing that "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity." (Rutherford 1990: 211)

This new mutation replaces the established pattern with a 'mutual and mutable' (Bhabha 1994) representation of cultural difference that is positioned *in-between* the coloniser and colonised. (Lindsay 1997) For Bhabha it is the indeterminate spaces in-between subject-positions that are lauded as the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices. (Bhabha 1994; Bhabha 1996) Bhabha posits hybridity as such a form of liminal or in-between space, where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' (Bhabha 1996) occurs and which he terms the *third space*. (Rutherford 1990) This is a

space intrinsically critical of essentialist positions of identity and a conceptualisation of 'original or originary culture':

For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space', which enables other positions to emerge. (Rutherford 1990: 211)

Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a *productive*, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new *possibility*. It is an 'interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative' (Bhabha 1994) space of new forms of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorisations of culture and identity. According to Bhabha, this hybrid third space is an *ambivalent* site where cultural meaning and representation have no 'primordial unity or fixity'. (Bhabha 1994)

The concept of the third space is submitted as useful for analysing the enunciation, transgression and subversion of dualistic categories going beyond the realm of colonial binary thinking and oppositional positioning. (Law 1997) Despite the exposure of the third space to contradictions and ambiguities, it provides a spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that "initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation." (Bhabha 1994: 1)

The *hybrid identity* is positioned within this third space, as 'lubricant' (Papastergiadis 1997) in the conjunction of cultures. The hybrid's potential is with their innate knowledge of 'transculturation' (Taylor, 1991), their ability to transverse both cultures and to translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference within a dynamic of exchange and inclusion. They have encoded within them a counter-hegemonic agency. At the point at which the coloniser presents a normalising, hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy opens up a third space of/for rearticulation of negotiation and meaning. (Bhabha 1996)

In presenting Bhabha's conceptual model, I am aware of criticism that his formulation is problematic. He has been admonished for neglecting to adequately conceptualise the historical and material conditions that would emerge within a colonial discourse analysis framework. (Parry 1996; Mitchell 1997) I do not posit this conceptual perspective within a political and cultural vacuum nor do I celebrate a false sense of liberation from the continued influence of the historical colonial encounter. What I do argue though is the need for a more optimistic and complex strategy of negotiating affinity and difference that recognises the postcolonial reality of settler-societies (such as Aotearoa/New Zealand). Here *postcolonial* does not mean that 'they' have gone home. Instead, 'they' are here to stay, indeed some of 'us' are them, and therefore the consequential imperative of *relationship negotiation*.¹

Rethinking Laws and Institutions for a Bicultural Aotearoa/New Zealand

The concepts of hybridity and the third space have considerable implications for any future reinventing of Aotearoa/New Zealand and any reconstructed sense of

¹ This point draws from a comment made by a keynote speaker on the first day of this conference querying the applicability of post-colonial studies to settler societies. The speaker noted an Aboriginal person's response to the discourse of Postcolonialism, positing the question 'have they gone home'?