

**Hybridity in the Third Space:
Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

**Paper Presented to
Te Oru Rangahau Maori Research and Development Conference
7-9 July 1998
Massey University**

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Introduction

This brief paper joins a growing call for a reconceptualisation of bicultural politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand that draws on an inclusionary and multifaceted identity politics. (Reilly 1996; McClean 1997; Spoonley 1997) The paper argues the need for this conceptualisation to take place in an alternative space that blurs the limitations of boundaries and engenders new possibilities.

In this paper I invoke Homi Bhabha's notions of *hybridity* and the *third space* and offer some introductory comment as to what these concepts might mean for a project that seeks to redesign the laws and institutions for a bicultural Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand

In the past, cultural politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand have followed an assimilationist, and then integrationist agenda rooted in historical colonial relations. (Mulgan 1989; Walker 1990; Fleras 1992; Armitage 1995; Sullivan 1997) The primary project of these agendas has been the acculturation of Maori. Since the 1980s, the notion of biculturalism has increasingly found popularity despite continual contestation as to its meaning and the form of its practical application. (Vasil 1988; Mulgan 1989; Durie 1993; Sharp 1995; Workman 1995; Sharp 1997)

What has become apparent though is the emergence of a cultural politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand concentrated and contested around the binary of Maori (the colonised) *or* Pakeha (the coloniser), over-simplified and essentialised. The dichotomous categories of 'us/them', 'either/or' have alarmingly found an increased currency resulting in adversarial polarities premised on exclusion and purity. The continued employment of this bifurcated structure offers little to a conceptualisation of Maori/Pakeha relationships where there are multiple subject-positions, aspirations, and contrasts continually at play through ongoing interaction and exchange. That is, the 'diverse realities' (Durie 1998) of Maori/Pakeha relations influenced by a manifold of considerations including race, gender, generation, class, geographical locale, political and sexual orientation.

What is required is a far more critical perspective of bicultural politics in New Zealand that rethinks our assumptions about culture and identity from an 'us-them' dualism to a mutual sense of 'both/and'. Thus must acknowledge and negotiate not only difference but also affinity.

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’?

nationhood and identity. They offer the possibility of a cultural politics that avoids a 'politics of polarity' (Bhabha 1994) between Maori and Pakeha. Instead, they are centered on the adaptation and transformation of culture and identity predicated within a new inclusive postcolonial Aotearoa/New Zealand community that seeks to reconcile and overcome the embeddedness of past antagonisms.

I want to make some brief comment as to the macro-implications that these concepts may have for the School of Law's (University of Waikato) project entitled 'Laws and Institutions for a Bicultural Aotearoa/New Zealand'.² In summary, the project proposes to 'develop new political and legal institutions which reflect socially, *inclusive bicultural* norms, principles, organisation arrangements and process and actualises the partnership explicit and implicit in the Treaty of Waitangi'. (School of Law 1998)

The project intends to 'build-up knowledge to bridge the divide in understanding between Maori and Pakeha cultures'. (School of Law 1998) An important activity then is the juxtaposition of Maori and Pakeha to find where affinity and contrast occur and how the tension between them in turn produces their hybridity. This hybridity and the emergent hybrid identities who have recognised and celebrated their hybridity in their self-definition have a significant and positive contribution to make in growing that knowledge capacity and negotiating that divide.

Bhabha's conceptual posturing also argues for an approach to the redesign of laws and institutions that moves *beyond* the categorical binary structure of contemporary bicultural Maori/Pakeha relations. Any redesign must recognise and provide for the hybridity dynamic of those relations. This redesign should take place in an alternative ambivalent site, a third space, where there is *ongoing* [re]vision, negotiation, and if necessary, renewal of those cultural practices, norms, values and identities inscribed and enunciated through the production of bicultural 'meaning and representation'. (Bhabha 1994)

The project also aims to 'create a knowledge base and enhance understanding and recognition of Maori law and values...' (School of Law 1998). Recalling that 'all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity' (Rutherford 1990: 211) any such endeavour commands a critical perspective of 'Maori cultural politics'. The notions of hybridity and the third space have a particular contribution to make betwixt 'Maori' given the appearance of dualistic categories (iwi/urban Maori) and increasing nostalgic claims to a false sense of authenticity and essentialised representation of 'traditional' Maori culture and identity (what is a real Maori?). Maori are highly heterogeneous (Durie 1998), with cultural structures and practices continually constructed and changing within an ambivalent 'Te Ao Hurihuri'.³ (King 1992)

Concluding Comment

² I am currently employed by the project as a researcher. For a fuller discussion of this project see Brown, M.(1998). Laws and Institutions for a Bicultural Aotearoa/New Zealand - Actualising the Partnership. Te Oru Rangahau: Maori Research and Development Conference, School of Maori Studies, Massey University, 387-393

³A common Maori phrase referring to the continual changing nature of the world.

This paper represents 'work in progress' and is submitted as a contribution to the wider ongoing project of a counter-hegemonic cultural politics that seeks to re-define the relationships between Maori and Pakeha in a postcolonial Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The concepts of hybridity and the third space contribute to an approach that avoids the perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms and develops inclusionary, not exclusionary, and multi-faceted, not dualistic, patterns of cultural exchange and maturation.

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Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Paper Presented to Te Oru Rangahau Maori Research and Development Conference 7-9 July 1998 Massey University. Paul Meredith (Ngati Kaputuhi/Pakeha) University of Waikato. Introduction. This brief paper joins a growing call for a reconceptualisation of bicultural politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand that draws on an inclusionary and multifaceted identity politics. (Reilly 1996; McClean 1997; Spoonley 1997) The paper argues the need for this conceptualisation to take place in an alternative space that blurs the limitations of boundaries and en July) Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-Cultural Politics in Aotearoa. Jan 1998. P Meredith. Meredith, P (1998, July). Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-Cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Paper presented to Te Oru Rangahau Māori Research and Development Conference, Massey University. Introduction: Breath of the Land. Jan 2006.