

Key Term: Hybridity

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Central to the field of postcolonial studies, the term hybridity has emerged out a set of controversial debates surrounding the theorization of national, ethnic, and cultural identity. On the one hand, beliefs in the existence of fixed national cultures have historically been both pervasive and influential: scholars have noted the “universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept” (Anderson 124), and the idea of a unique national essence has been described as “one of the strongest foci for resistance to imperial control in colonial societies” (Ashcroft et al 117). National culture, in other words, is often seen as a coherent entity that forms the basis for political solidarity. Yet, on the other hand, many postcolonial theorists have pointed out how such essentialist notions of national identity have been undermined by the numerous cross-cultural encounters and exchanges that have occurred both as a result of imperialism and other forms of global migration. Languages, ethnicities, and cultural practices, including musical ones, have all been blended and hybridized as a result of large-scale movements of people and ideas across the globe. As such, it is difficult not to consider nations and cultures in terms of the porous and fluid nature of their borders. So, while the theoretical considerations of identity that have emerged from the history of colonialism have amplified concerns about the preservation and definition of national cultures, they have also led to a fundamental questioning of the stability of such cultures in the first place.

Early accounts of what has been termed hybridity often assumed that cultures could exist as separate entities with singular traditions. E.K. Brathwaite, for example, argued that the establishment of a unique Creole society in Jamaica during the 18th and 19th century was a consequence of two *distinct* cultural groups (white Europeans and black Africans) responding to one another in the context of both a specific material environment (plantation-economy Jamaica) and a specific social framework (slavery) (152). Numerous structures and processes – from “work routines” to “communal recreational activities” (152) – created an atmosphere in which both black and white society were influenced by one another, and resulted in the creation of a new social group. As evidence, Brathwaite cited how slaves with more intimate contact with their white masters often engaged in the imitation of supposedly Western behaviors and practices (153), and how many white men had black mistresses by whom they were demonstrably influenced (153). Miscegenation further intertwined the two cultures, and inevitably, Creole society came to be seen as distinct from the African and European beginnings from which it emerged, thereby allowing both the affirmation and exclusion of Creole identity. Importantly, musical traditions also became central to the survival of such societies: George Elliott Clarke’s discussion of the hybridized gospel songs developed by “Africadians” in 19th century Nova Scotia demonstrates the significance of musical culture to this particular group (110). The most important point, however, to be drawn from Brathwaite’s account is that it allows for the hybridization of identities even while it allows for the retention of separable cultural traditions. As Ashcroft et al. put it, Brathwaite’s notion of cre-

lization “is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions but rather on their continual and mutual development” (138).

Despite the early influence of Brathwaite upon the theorization of hybridity, the notion of cultures as fixed entities capable of blending with one another quickly came under attack. Homi Bhabha in particular troubles the idea of autonomous national and ethnic identities by incorporating post-structuralist theories of language into understandings of cultural difference (155). Bhabha argues that in many respects “nationality is narratively produced, rather than arising from an intrinsic essence” (Leitch et al 2377), and that all statements of cultural identity are accordingly subject to “the general conditions of language,” which ensure that “meaning is never simply mimetic” (Bhabha 156). Put another way, Bhabha believes that all discursively constructed cultural identities exist in a dialogic relationship to one another, and that the semantic contingencies and indeterminacies indicated by post-structuralist theory apply to all such identities, leaving them “unstable, agonized, and in constant flux” (Loomba 153). In more material terms, Bhabha envisions hybridity as the creation of divided colonial subjects who are constituted from a discourse that is “always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (qtd in Loomba 149). But although Bhabha’s influential deconstruction of cultural binaries has illuminated the extent to which different identities are defined textually and relationally, it too has not escaped criticism.

The main objections to Bhabha’s theory are that it “universalizes the colonial encounter” by making hybridization an identical process in all contexts (Loomba 149-150),

and that it ignores important geospatial cultural distinctions. Critics are quick to point out the ways in which hybridization differs on the basis of factors such as class, race, gender, and location. Ania Loomba, for example, highlights the degree to which interaction between cultures can vary by noting that in some instances colonial authority “wore a native face” (150), and that indigenous peoples often never even set eyes upon their oppressors. Loomba would argue Bhabha’s exclusively linguistic understandings of hybridity do not adequately capture the variations in experience that result when colonial authority is diffused through indigenous servants rather than enforced directly. Similarly, it could be argued that Bhabha’s theory would in no way differentiate between the compulsory gender roles present in colonial society, and the concomitantly different positions of men and women within colonial discourse. Overall, regardless of the extent to which hybridity is thought of either in universal or particular terms, it is clear that the concept is central to any understanding of how identities are produced in a world impacted substantially by the legacies of colonialism and its extensive initiation of cross-cultural global encounters.

Improvisatory practices, both musical and non-musical, are also central to the expression and creation of these hybridized, postcolonial identities. The scholar and improviser George Lewis notes that a “central aspect of Afrological improvisation is the notion of the importance of personal narrative” (156), and he cites musicians who attest to this point: Charlie Parker claimed “If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn” (158), and Yusef Lateef stated that “The sound of improvisation seems to tell us what kind of person is improvising” (158). Yet this is not to say that improvisation can be reduced to a process of self-definition. On the contrary, as Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble argue, im-

provisation is a fundamentally communal activity that fosters “new ways of thinking about, and participating in, human relationships” (23); improvisers share, collaborate, and mutually influence one another. Accordingly, the dialogic nature of improvisation almost suggests that it axiomatically contributes to the transmission and hybridization of heterogeneous cultural forms. Examples pertaining to this point are also increasingly being addressed in academic discourse: ICASP collaborators Jason Stanyek and George Lewis have written, respectively, on the development of a Pan-African intercultural community through musical improvisation and the mutually influential relationship that exists between “Afrological” and “Eurological” musical paradigms. Stanyek’s essay in particular highlights how improvisation can be seen to intersect with the concept of hybridity through an analysis of the musical collaborations of Chano Pozo and Dizzy Gillespie:

What Gillespie and Pozo did was to set a number of precedents for future Pan-African collaborations in jazz; an emphasis on composition with a simultaneous affirmation of improvisation; the insertion of nonjazz repertoires into jazz; the accommodation of instruments not typically found in jazz ensembles; the use of non-English and multilingual texts; the highlighting of African spirituality. But perhaps most important were (1) their ability to juxtapose different histories without sacrificing identity and (2) their reflexive use of notions of cultural difference as a basis for collaboration. (88-89)

The most important feature of this passage is that it illustrates how Stanyek is documenting intersections of cultural difference: he notes how disparate instruments, languages, and spiritual beliefs all find a common footing in the context of a communal musical practice. Accordingly, if hybridity can be understood as the conceptualization of the changing relationships of cultural difference that exist in the world, then Stanyek’s essay suggests that musical improvisation provides a unique social space in which such cultural

differences can become engaged and interrelated in a potentially hopeful manner. In the improvisatory model, although not a cure-all by any means, cultural difference is at least seen “as a basis for collaboration” rather than as a precondition for violence or subordination (89).

As for the discussion of non-musical forms of improvisation in relation to hybridity, legal discourse offers a good starting point. Law is, in many respects, typically conceived to be a system of rules that operates in an anything but improvisatory manner. Sara Ramshaw, for instance, argues that the prevailing view of Western law “eschew[s] all spontaneous or unpredictable elements” (1), and that this view stipulates “[a]ny invention of law by judges or others must be determinately contained or restricted through, *inter alia*, the device of legal precedent” (4, original emphasis). Law, in other words, is understood to be highly predictable, so as to ensure that “like cases will be treated alike” (Renquist qtd. in Ramshaw 4). But as Ramshaw goes on to point out, this vision of law as static and generalized is also highly problematic. She argues that since “no two actions can be exactly the same, judges “make new law” (qtd 6) *every time* they are asked to decide a case” (4 original emphasis). Accordingly, instances of invention are an intrinsic aspect of legal discourse. And moreover, while an act of legal invention can only occur in a singular instance, Ramshaw, drawing on Derrida, argues that such instances “can only be brought into presence or made present, *through* law” (7):

[law is] necessary not only for [invention] to be recognized, identified, legitimized, institutionalized as invention (to be patented we might say), but for invention to even to occur, or let us say, for it to *come about*.
(Derrida qtd. in Ramshaw 7)

Put another way, Ramshaw and Derrida are deconstructing the invented law / static law binary by illustrating how both concepts are mutually reliant in their self-constitution: invention needs law in order to be realized, and law is always inventive by virtue of its articulation as repetition and difference. With this notion in mind, the ways in which legal discourse can be hybridized become more apparent. In the context of colonialism, for instance, Gary Boire points out that “imperialist law in a colonial setting is, by definition, always a transplanted hybrid” (204), since the use of law in a new context is equivalent to the articulation of an existing discourse as “repetition and difference” (204). Essentially, this is Bhabha’s argument surrounding dialogic narratives applied to legal language: law, like any discourse, is always citationally repeated, and thus always altered in every instance of its usage. Judges improvise new law through their citational repetitions of legal precedent, and the deconstruction of the binary distinction between legal discourse and colonial discourse renders both constructs hybrids. Put simply, law is always to some extent both improvised and hybridized, much like the many musical practices documented by Stanyek, Fischlin, and Heble, among others.

Finally, in concluding an evaluation of the connections between improvisation and the theorization of hybridity, it is important to recognize the ways in which the political connotations of each term diverge. Hybridity, in the context of colonialism, has typically been associated with a history of failed cultural erasure carried out by imperial powers - the subtext of the concept is one of perceived cultural loss, fragmented subjectivity, and widespread suffering. But in the context of musical improvisation at least, hybridization takes on a more hopeful tone: cultural difference is celebrated; pluralistic

communities are fashioned; and orthodox and exclusionary modes of artistic practice are rejected. So, while the negative history of hybridity as a concept may owe much to an absence of the sociopolitical ideals that characterize improvisation, future hybridizations may owe even more to their presence.

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