Introduction: Hybridities in Theory, Culture, and Experience

Theories of contemporary social life, rooted primarily in critical constructivist, anthropological, feminist, and postcolonial inquiries, offer notable and valuable lenses through which to view and understand social organization, cultural systems, and identity in an era of globalization and empire. Concepts such as “liminality,” “hybridity,” “border,” “creolization,” and “mestizaje” have emerged from oppressive struggle to theorize as well as rhetorically acclaim a promising new era of human agency, democratic community, and cultural innovation amidst “hybridized webs of meaning” (Hannerz 1996, cf. Weber). Homi Bhabha’s oft-cited statement on identity provides a glimpse into this theoretical regime:

The move away from singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need
to think beyond narratives of originary [sic] and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha 1994, 2)

What Bhabha describes here occurs in a “third space” delineated by processes that go by various names – creolization, hybridity, syncretism, mestizaje – and is highly heuristic for understanding both the human opportunities and constraints available in the 21st century. Both a location (and an anti-location) and a process (and an anti-process), third space offers a place to be at play in the fields of identity, traversing, so it seems, large swaths of historical constructions, political structures, social contracts (racial, gendered, classed, etc.), and cultural systems of meaning-making, in the emergent “space” for a new knowledge production system – a system grounded more in the people than in the meta-narratives proposed by modernism that founded the disciplines and dominant modes of knowledge production in the 19th and 20th centuries. It appears that the study of multiraciality and multiracial identity might benefit from such theoretical scaffolds.

Though these conceptual schemas and apparatuses are heuristic and pose potential threats to previous constructions so damaging to human agency, there is reason to be a bit skeptical of the uncritical usage of such notions to describe such a dizzying array of phenomena as to render the theories of hybridity and third space somewhat otherworldly, detached from lived experience, and potentially meaningless. Palmie (2006), following Boas (1966/1887), lays out a central problem in the study of hybridity and creolization by asking whether “[they are] meant to index a distinct class or group of objectively occurring phenomena that can be unambiguously distinguished from other ‘noncreole,’ ‘uncreolized,’ or ‘creolizing’ ones on the basis of specifiable criteria?” (434) or by postulating that perhaps we “come to realize that the distribution of phenomena characterized by x is so steadily approaching ubiquity that x has increasingly become essential (or at least typologically salient) to a historically specific group …of the late 20th and early 21st centuries” (437). These are strong critiques located at the level of conceptualization and operationalization, begging questions like: Is multiraciality (hybridity, mestizaje, in-betweeness) a unique feature of human experience in particular