

acculturation, which is precisely the term which Ortiz argued had to be superseded. At this point it seems that 'transculturation' does not so much replace 'acculturation' as subsume it.

In the next part of his explanation of the realities which justify the coining of a new term, Ortiz gives a brief cultural history of Cuba starting with the earliest inhabitants. Much of this history focuses on the human aspects of the process of transculturation, so he makes it quite clear what acute suffering was caused for all those involved. When transculturation failed it is evident that the alternative was the simple and rapid destruction of the culture of the weaker group, whether it be that of the indigenous 'taínos' or that of one of the African groups brought in. Ortiz underlines the rapidity of the processes and lays particular emphasis on the appalling experience of disconnectedness and disorientation of the Africans. However, having established the appalling nature of the Africans' suffering, Ortiz rather oddly reintroduces all the other immigrants into his description in such a way as again to suggest equivalence:

En tales condiciones de desarraigo y amputación social, desde continentes ultraoceánicos, año tras año y siglo tras siglo, miles y miles de seres humanos fueron traídos a Cuba. En mayor o menor grado de disociación estuvieron en Cuba así los negros como los blancos. Todos convivientes, arriba o abajo, en un mismo ambiente de terror y de fuerza; terror del oprimido por el castigo, terror del opresor por la revancha; todos fuera de justicia, fuera de ajuste, fuera de sí. Y todos en trance doloroso de transculturación a un nuevo ambiente cultural. (Ortiz, 2002: 259)⁸

This paragraph therefore has a rather odd progression, at one stage seeming to single out the particular hardships of the Africans, at another indicating shared suffering and transculturation. Such discrepancies as these can make Ortiz's theorising in these pages seem less than fully evolved.

After these two pages dealing with the human dimension of cultural processes in Cuba, Ortiz turns away from subjective experience to end his theoretical discussion by returning to the impersonal dimension of terminology. This oscillation between the personal and the impersonal is characteristic of Ortiz's account. It is at this point that he comes closest to a full explanation of transculturation, and of his reasons for rejecting 'acculturation'. In his opinion (and again he becomes defensive), the term 'transculturation' provides the best expression of the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another. He suggests that 'transculturation' goes beyond the mere acquisition of a different culture to embrace other elements: 'la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial desculturación, y, además, significa la consiguiente

8 In such conditions of uprooting and social amputation, from continents across the ocean, year after year and century after century, thousands and thousands of human beings were brought to Cuba. To a greater or lesser degree of dissociation both negroes and whites lived in Cuba. All living together, above and below, in the same atmosphere of terror and force; terror of punishment for the oppressed, terror of revenge for the oppressor; all outside justice, misaligned, beside themselves. And all in a painful process of transculturation to a new cultural environment.

creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse de neoculturación'⁹ (Ortiz, 2002: 260). Although not very detailed and perhaps not wholly coherent (it is not self-evident, for example, how a partial deculturation fits with the notion of the loss of a previous culture), this explanation gives some sense of the phases through which an individual might pass in the transcultural experience. That experience involves both loss and gain though neither is absolute: the loss is partial and the gain is of new cultural phenomena (and not of a complete new culture). The implication at this point must be that Ortiz sees acculturation as involving the complete loss of a previous culture and assimilation to another, already existing one. Although Ortiz has, somewhat confusingly, also suggested in this chapter that transculturation subsumes acculturation (Ortiz, 2002: 255), it seems to me that the kind of differentiation between the two terms which I have brought out here is important. The distinction certainly distances Ortiz from a number of recent commentators, who, in using the term in connection with contemporary circumstances, pay little attention to any initial phase of partial deculturation (not to mention all the suffering associated with it) and stress creative interplay between cultures.

To end his definition of transculturation Ortiz introduces a simile: 'en todo abrazo de culturas sucede lo que en la cópula genética de los individuos: la criatura siempre tiene algo de ambos progenitores, pero también siempre es distinta de cada uno de los dos'¹⁰ (Ortiz, 2002: 260). I find the simile of the embrace rather bland and unconvincing at this stage, and it would be interesting to hear more about how the Africans in Cuba 'embraced' the cultures of Europe and how the Spaniards on the island 'embraced' African cultures. What is undoubtedly significant here for future theory is the space which this genetic metaphor allows to the notion of hybridisation. But, in my reading, the use of this simile is a sign of how Ortiz's exposition does not achieve a thoroughly worked out explanation of the variety and nuance of the cultural processes involved in transculturation. While undoubtedly suggestive, his theory as expounded in this brief chapter of *Contrapunteo cubano* suffers from some gaps in its explanation and also from some internal inconsistencies which close reading brings to the surface.

Whither Transculturation?

Coinciding with some of my concerns, a number of recent commentators – for example, Silvia Spitta (1995), John Beverley (1999) and Alberto Moreiras (2001) – have pointed out difficulties with Ortiz's theory and with current trends in the development of the theory of transculturation. It is evident that there are problematic elements in both Ortiz's theorisation and his linking up of the theory with historical realities: a certain lack of specificity, at times a sketchiness about cultural processes and at others a less than clear fit between theory and circumstance. However, there are important aspects

9 The loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be called a partial *deculturation*, and, in addition, it signifies the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena which could be called *neoculturation*.

10 In any embrace (*abrazo*) between cultures there occurs the same as in individuals' genetic reproduction: the offspring always has something of both progenitors, but is also always distinct from each of them.

of his thinking on which we would do well to keep a firm grasp. One thing which seems to me to matter in Ortiz's account as a whole is the reality of complex cultural interactions and their political and social freight. In his theorising he may oscillate between discussions of human experience and broad cultural processes but he does devote some attention to what happens to human beings as those processes are unfolding. It is not just a question of disembodied cultural encounters and clashes, of material objects and linguistic, religious and social practices but of human trauma and creativity.

In addition, I would suggest that Ortiz also has an acute sense of why transculturation is a term needed in Latin America. The kind of processes which the term refers to are hardly unique to that region – in fact they must have been a virtual constant back into prehistory: where peoples and cultures have met and interacted, logically transculturation will have occurred from time to time. And yet, this term was coined in Cuba in the twentieth century. It is here that Ortiz's political and historical sense is important in reminding us of the intensity of certain Latin American realities, which have pushed a conscious and strategic transculturation to the forefront. Latin America's lengthy colonial history of exploitation and manipulation and its simultaneous, sustained assimilation to Iberian modes of thought and governance mean that it has been engaged in a search for resistance and independence that may be accounted a cultural constant. That search for resistance was not a superficial or modish embrace of heterogeneity – it was a matter of fundamental importance and self-respect.

In the light of some recent commentaries on transculturation, which have linked it with autonomy and resistance to global and neo-colonial forces, it seems important to ask how feasible in fact such autonomy and resistance are in a globalised world. A degree of scepticism seems to me to be in order about how much autonomy might be achievable, and about the extent to which the idea of a resistant self-identification might be mystificatory. These questions are about where transculturation might take a society or culture, and about the political efficacy of neoculturation. In his discussion of Ortiz and Angel Rama,¹¹ John Beverley argues that they both conceive of transculturation as a teleology connected to modernity and the nation-state: 'For both Rama and Ortiz transculturation functions as a teleology, not without marks of violence and loss, but *necessary* in the last instance for the formation of the modern nation-state and a national (or continental) identity that would be something other than the sum of its parts, since the original identities are sublated in the process of transculturation itself' (Beverley, 1999: 45). He goes on to be even more explicit in relation to Rama: 'For Rama, transculturation is above all an instrument for achieving Latin American cultural and economic modernity in the face of the obstacles to that modernity created by colonial and then neo-colonial forms of dependency' (Beverley, 1999: 45). Alberto Moreiras says something similar when he argues that, for Rama, successful transculturation is about assimilation to modernisation as unavoidable reality, as world destiny (Moreiras, 2001: 188). On these readings, Rama and Ortiz saw transculturation as a necessary negotiation with and therefore acceptance of powerful global forces, presumably via local adjustments (though neither Beverley nor Moreiras mentions the

11 Rama's *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982) is one of the most significant contributions to the discussion of transculturation.

neoculturation that was central in Ortiz). Beverley's and Moreiras' readings identify effectively Latin America's ambivalence, as it is caught between the desire for assimilation to global trends and the desire for the (relative) autonomy which the condition of the nation-state implies. But Beverley goes beyond a critical view of this way of positioning Latin America in *external* realities, and also underlines the shortcomings of the notion that the *internal* effects of transculturation might be to further the "incomplete" project of Latin American modernity' (Beverley, 1999: 46) by increasing social integration. He is utterly dismissive when he says: 'The idea of transculturation expresses in both Ortiz and Rama a *fantasy* of class, gender, and racial reconciliation [...]' (Beverley, 1999: 47).

The fundamental question that writers like Beverley and Moreiras raise is whether transculturation in the contemporary world can challenge the hold of global modernisation. Now, perhaps even more than in Ortiz's time, this is the framework which must be addressed. And the answer to that fundamental question may depend on the location and nature of the transculturation that occurs.¹² But it may also be that the notion of 'challenging the hold of global modernisation' is simply overambitious. Much of the time, transculturation is local, a tactical adaptation to external forms, though nonetheless significant at that level. But this limitation reveals what is the core of the question about the effectiveness of transculturation: namely whether it is conceivable that it might operate strategically. The negative view would be that, current political and economic structures being what they are, transculturation is and can aspire to be no more than a survival technique. On this view, transculturation localises and partially mitigates dominant political and economic realities. The positive view would be that, such is the creativity and diversity of cultural practices, transcultural forms will constantly emerge to open up new spaces and possibilities, including elements of critique and self-determination.¹³ There are at least two ways in which the positive view might be argued, one being via a conscious attempt to create a variant cultural logic or autonomy and the other via an emphasis on the potential impact of subaltern cultures. I have doubts about both kinds of affirmative argument. In the case of creating a variant cultural logic, while the will to creativity is revealing and may cast light on the oppressive logic of modernisation, the attempt to create a local specificity may be no more than a reaction to dominant practices and as such may leave them in place or effectively reinforce them, thereby changing nothing fundamental. In the case of emphasising subaltern cultures, there may be a danger of assuming that those cultures embody some absolute difference or are the repository of some 'untarnished truth'. Beyond these issues, there are ethical concerns to do with presuming to represent subaltern points of view and to mobilise them for a broader emancipatory cause. Nonetheless, both lines of argument serve the useful purpose of reminding us of the need to question global cultural homogenisation and may enable the examination from a new perspective of the impact of global economic and political realities.

12 Charles Taylor has argued a similar point about the need to differentiate between forms of modernity: see Taylor (1999).

13 The now classic account of how cultures, through their myriad interactions, transform their practices through adaptation and regeneration is suggestively explored via the notion of 'reconversión cultural' by García Canclini (1990).

A sceptical approach might lead one to the view that transculturation is no more than an angle on the basic process of conforming with modernisation, a process in which the effects of neoculturation are at best relatively minor. One way of putting the claims for the reach of neoculturation to the test is to ask whether there is evidence in the contemporary world that current examples of transculturation have any impact beyond Latin American borders, in other words whether there is any real reciprocity in the cultural dynamic, and I would hazard a guess that a deep impact is only felt where there is also migration. In asking whether transculturation can aspire to any fundamental impact, the point is to uncover the relative positions of power of the cultures involved in any encounter. Such is the flexibility and strength of metropolitan cultures that it is conceivable that, when they are not simply appropriating other cultures to turn their products into consumer commodities, they could indeed absorb elements from the periphery, adapt them, thereby strengthen themselves and return with a renewed capacity to infiltrate or manipulate the periphery.

It is also vital not to overlook the structure of power internal to Latin America which conditions the dynamics of transculturation. Neil Larsen has said that transculturation offers a mystificatory and therefore false solution to the underlying problems of the extreme social duality in the region. He argues that transculturation does not address the fundamental conditions of social division:

The essential point [...] is to grasp the cultural duality that separates rich and poor, city and country, etc. as a problem that cannot be solved on its own cultural terms. Its solution must be social, historical – and ultimately political. Thus, while transculturation may enable a more precise, empirical description of cultural life on its most immediate level in Latin America, it cannot give even the slightest indication of how to resolve the cultural dualities that are and continue to be the historically inevitable result of colonisation and a persistently enforced neo-colonial relation to the global economic order. The very historical forces that have produced the deep cultural divisions reflected [...] in transcultural theory continuously reproduce these same divisions even as the spontaneous tendency to transculturation blunts their edges. (Larsen, 2001: 139)

In short, for Larsen, claims for the effectiveness of transculturation are a culturalist indulgence and he dismisses any idea that it might substantially modify social, historical or political conditions.

It is no accident that doubts about transculturation derive from the left and from those who observe how institutionalisation blunts the radicality of most discourses and terminologies. A vital aspect of the leftist critique derives from an awareness that Latin America is *always already* in a global system, in a specific place and on specific terms, and against such a reality the shifting of culturally conditioned perceptions of how the world can work and the values inherent in those perceptions is only a first step towards something different. History bears out this point of view. After all, considering Ortiz's attention to the colonial roots of transculturation, it is evident that, in several hundred years, it has not equalised relations between Latin America and the metropolitan

powers. Aspects of the content and dynamics of the relationship may have changed, but one may wonder whether the fundamentals of the relationship are substantially different today. It is from this perspective that the idea of benign and democratic interchanges between Latin American and the other cultures seems wide of the mark.

Conclusion

Certain recent commentators (notably, Beverley, Moreiras, Larsen and Cornejo-Polar) have raised doubts about how transculturation affects ways of thinking about and perceiving Latin America. Few, I imagine, would argue against the notion that a world in which acculturation (as cultural take-over) was less routine and accepted would be a better place, but one needs to be equally careful about a rush to invest in the idea of transculturation as a panacea, given that it does not occur in a vacuum and, as I have been at pains to underline, needs to be seen in its interweaving with structures of power and the range of mutual influences between North and South. There are diverse and uncontrollable flows of information and networks of cultural interaction in operation today, but the questions are how those flows and networks operate, how information is moving, where and how the influences are absorbed, how cultures institute and disseminate value, what degree of deculturation is occurring and what kinds of neoculturation are emerging. There has been some emphasis in recent discussions of transculturation on interaction, but I think that we need to be clear about what we take that term to mean, because interaction may not imply equality and mutuality. Influences may operate back and forth between cultures but be asymmetrical in quantity and quality, be highly imbalanced and still take place with well oiled efficiency. Above all, therefore, and recalling elements in Ortiz, we need to try to understand how these processes affect people's lives and the social relations in which they live.

Moreover, that leaves us with the vital issue of what can be done about the imbalanced, asymmetrical influences where they impact negatively on the lives of those in one of the cultures involved. In the Latin American context, I am not optimistic in the short term about the prospects for a far-reaching challenge. It seems to me overly optimistic to look to indigenous or marginalised cultures as a basis for resistance – the experiences of the indigenous and the marginalised are at best urgent reminders of what needs to be done. Any moves to oppose dominant cultures need to find ways to go beyond a reflexive reaction to them: simple opposition easily solidifies cultural relations into polarisations which ultimately reconfirm the dominant as the driving force, without isolating the latter's own heterogeneity and internal contradictions. One needs to stress and stress again that all cultures are heterogeneous, potentially contradictory and constantly in transformation, however slowly. Dominance is often partial and reliant on processes of transculturation which are *reciprocally*, if differentially, transformative (Coronil, 1996).

In my view, the best way of redrawing the cultural-political map is not to shrink back into narrow self-affirmations but, on the one hand, to expose what the dominant cultures are and how they work and are transformed, both in the metropolis and on the periphery. On the other hand, in order to find and define emancipatory spaces we

need to continue trying to understand how specific processes of transculturation function both in accommodating and in deflecting the effects of the global. It may be that the crucial leverage to carry out critical analysis comes from the local or the regional, precisely because the global and the local are intertwined and not simply polarised against each other. Such critical analysis may not in itself change the world but it can further understanding of what is happening in it. Thus, it is in his critical restraint and his careful examination of specific processes of local cultural transformation, that the ultimate value of Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano* lies.

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The 2006 SLAS Lecture* Latin America as a White Settler Society

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Latin America's nineteenth century history of Europeanisation, immigration and extermination suggests that the continent should fit neatly into the category of 'settler colonialism', a notion usually employed to describe the white settler colonies of European empires other than those of Spain and Portugal. While the last years of empire and the early days of the republics saw efforts to include the indigenous population as citizens, the racist white elites in the century after independence sought to import European migrants to prevent the non-white population from participating in power. The desired 'whitening' of the population was rarely successful, but the weight of white immigration helped create a twentieth century society that ignored the indigenous peoples – until the popular explosions of recent years.

Keywords: settler colonialism, immigration, extermination, racism, indigenous peoples, Black studies.

Introduction

The term 'white settler' is a familiar entry in the histories of most European empires, and it comes with a distinctive and rather pejorative ring, except on the websites of the extreme Right, where white settlers, the white race, and white supremacy are seamlessly merged. Yet the white population of Latin America is not usually described as 'white settler', and the expression is never used by Latin Americans themselves. Indeed no Spanish or Portuguese word or phrase exists that can adequately translate the English expression.¹

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1 The French word '*colon*' (or *pied noir* in the specific North African context) can be used in the same pejorative sense, but the Spanish word for settlers – '*colonos*' – or the Portuguese '*pobladores*' – are purely descriptive and do not carry the same hint of disapproval. *Criollo* might be the closest, but creoles were also of African descent, and it would be difficult to persuade Latin Americans to use the word in the sense of white settlers. Roger Kelley has told me that the common currency in Panama for the European white elite is '*rabiblanco*' or 'white-tail'.