Debates

Transculturation: Contrapuntal Notes to Critical Orthodoxy

MARK MILLINGTON
University of Nottingham, UK

Transculturation is a frequent point of reference in Latin American cultural studies, but overuse is tending to create a new critical orthodoxy, and inattention to precise definition may be compromising effectiveness. This article assesses current deployments of the term and, through a close reading of the theoretical section of Ortiz’s *Contrapunto cubano*, seeks to establish an understanding of what is involved in the cultural and human experience of transculturation. It concludes by examining recent critiques of the term and suggests a sceptical view of the potential for and limits on transculturation in the global context of Latin American cultures.

Keywords: Transculturation, cultural studies, Fernando Ortiz, hybridity.

The reflections in this article derive from concerns about the current condition of thinking about transculturation in relation to Latin America. In much recent work on the region, particularly in metropolitan cultural studies, the terms transculturation and hybridisation have become frequent touchstones, and there has developed a striking productivity associated with them. As with any term or concept there is a danger that overuse will degenerate into orthodoxy and so produce a devaluation, which may be but one step away from obsolescence. I wonder if we have not advanced some way through that process, particularly as, in the case of transculturation, those using it frequently do not trouble to define it, often making no more than gestural references to it. Hence, it seems opportune to ask what need is being answered by recourse to notions such as transculturation and hybridisation, why discussion tends to gravitate towards them, and what job they are being asked to perform in relation to global or regional cultural politics.

1 This essay is an edited version of a chapter which was published in *Transculturation: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America*, co-edited by Felipe Hernández, Mark Millington and Iain Borden (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2005). The author thanks Rodopi for its kind permission to print this shorter version.

2 Enrico Mario Santí has noticed the same problem: see Santí (2002: 94).
Fundamentally these terms are now used to articulate a postcolonial stance of political resistance, a will both to highlight movements of or the capacity for opposition within Latin America and to question the perspectives of official or dominant thinking about the region. It is not always clear whether resistance is simply uncovered – that is, revealed to exist as undeveloped potential – or whether the ‘right’ analytical method is required to construct it. But such a stance has a history that can be traced back to the beginnings of modern Latin American Studies in the 1950s and 1960s, when analytical positions were taken up against capitalism, the technocratic pursuit of modernisation and the ravages wrought by them. The cause was autonomy and self-determination, the means rigorous (and usually radical) academic analysis, the unanswered question the degree of impact of the latter on the former. While some political realities may have changed since then, it remains clear that the global position of Latin America, and above all many of its economic realities, cannot overall be said to have improved much. Nor can Latin American countries be said to have followed the paths and resistance which radical analysis tended to propose, which may provide food for thought about a response to that unanswered question.

The terms that I am focusing on might be seen as the latest tools deployed in the Humanities to prise open the snare in which Latin America has been trapped, whether in political, cultural or identity terms. They seek to exercise some critical leverage on the hierarchical binaries of imperialism/neo-colony, centre/periphery, identity/otherness, which apparently hold Latin America in their iron grip. The sense is that what is produced by transculturation or hybridisation does not fit within neat binaries, that it straddles, mixes and disrupts. Though by no means exactly synonymous, the nexus of terms from transculturation and hybridisation to heterogeneity and mestizaje all manifest the will to subvert, transgress, undermine, oppose or obstruct the workings of metropolitan and internal elite power and authority. But my point is that these terms acquire their own authority; sooner or later all of them come to obey a logic that consolidates their impact into the domesticated authority of a now mainstream cultural studies, however much qualified as postcolonial. And, perhaps shattering even that compromised condition and emphasising the sheer difficulty of resistance, we should bear in mind Terry Eagleton’s observation: ‘No way of life in history has been more in love with transgression and transformation, more enamoured of the hybrid and pluralistic, than capitalism’ (Eagleton, 2003: 119). On this view, one might wonder whether the pursuit of hybridisation and transculturation was ever more than a sanctioned option. Hence, my purpose is to examine some of what is in play with these terms and to propose some thoughts in sceptical counterpoint to mere acceptance of them.

There have been a number of terms used in this area of cultural analysis whose inter-relations are not absolutely clear. Mestizaje was long favoured but has now become generally confined to discussions of racial mixing, though not uniformly so. Likewise, syncretism had some general usage but is now seen as best applied in circumstances of religious fusion. Transculturation and hybridisation are currently much

---

in favour, although they have different profiles. For reasons of its Cuban origins, the first has a distinctly Latin American identity and is rarely employed outside that context (though see Pratt, 1992). By contrast, the second is deployed with global reference and has associations with post-structuralist postcolonialism because of the widespread acceptance of Homi Bhabha’s view of it. Broadly speaking, these terms have all been used to refer to processes of cultural mixing and the resulting effects, but it is striking in the cases of transculturation and hybridisation that they are asymmetrical in their terminological range. Transculturation stands alone as a description of a process of mixing. By contrast, while hybridisation covers that same process it is also linked with hybridity as a general concept or as a description of a state and with hybrid as a label for the product which is the outcome of a mixing process. The degree to which hybridity and hybrid are seen as static and hybridisation as dynamic could spark an interesting debate: given that objects are in use, it is unlikely that a hybrid object is ever simply static. But that potential debate signals an interesting truth of our current thinking and it is that to a remarkable degree we lack precise definitions of all these terms. Now that lack may be seen as advantageous in allowing flexibility, but it also has drawbacks in terms of understanding the nature of the processes and products of cultural mixing, a point which seems to me vital in grasping the political dimensions of any given situation. To respond to that need it is important to see what a transcultural or hybrid culture or artefact actually looks like. Thus, a series of questions presents itself: is the genealogy of a hybrid culture or artefact regional, national or global? Is the product homogeneous, heterogeneous, unstable, seamless, functional or fixed? Or is a transcultural or hybrid culture or object potentially all of those things and other things besides? Are the diverse elements that have come together still identifiable as such or have they blended or fused into a completely new identity? If the object or culture is internally heterogeneous, does that imply necessarily that it is fissured and liable to malfunction or break down? The answers to these questions may vary according whether we are talking about a whole culture or a subculture or even one object or practice within a culture; but what is certain is that they will vary according to the purposes of the person providing the answer.

In Bakhtin’s work on hybridisation, different very broadly defined forms of it are described. On the one hand he refers to ‘organic hybrids’, which he sees as fusing elements in a way that does not draw attention to the mixing itself, which do not have internal contrasts and oppositions that are significant, and which have been productive historically with potential for the creation of new world views (Bakhtin, 1981: 360). On the other hand, he refers to ‘intentional hybrids’, in which hybridity is seen as internally dialogic and productive of contestatory positions (Bakhtin, 1981: 360–361). It is important to recall that Bakhtin allowed for these different possibilities, even though his own attention focused on the second kind of hybridity in which a social or political authority might be challenged or turned on its head. This is a preference that Homi Bhabha shares in his discussions of specifically colonial authority, an approach which has come virtually

---

4 See, for example, his Nation and Narration (1990) and The Location of Culture (1994).
to monopolise discussions of hybridity. Bhabha’s undertaking was to theorise those (sometimes barely perceived) elements through which the colonised ‘other’ destabilises the apparent authority of colonial power. In that way Bakhtin’s formulation transforms into one of explicit politics and active challenge; hence, the attraction to many of Bhabha’s work and the slipping from view of the ‘organic hybrid’. Bhabha is interested in highlighting a disjunctive, postcolonial time, and his insistence on the ambivalence in hybridity runs counter to any notion of resolved tensions between or within cultures.

Such an emphasis is not remote from a position taken up by Antonio Cornejo-Polar, who, in a series of essays in the 1980s and 1990s, explored the notion of cultural heterogeneity in the context of Andean Transculturation (e.g. Cornejo-Polar, 1982, 1994, 1997). In a sense, Cornejo-Polar’s heterogeneity is the equivalent of Bhabha’s ambivalence – in both, it is that dimension of cultural mixing which manifests non-conformity and discrepancy, and which foregrounds the political potential for transformation. As Abril Trigo indicates: ‘Cornejo’s purpose is not to represent a hegemonising totality; instead, he wishes to formulate a concept expressing an antagonistic plurality, the tense coexistence of diverse cultures, whose heterogeneity is fulfilled in their segmented participation in dissimilar systems of production’ (Trigo, 2000: 92).

However, in his discussion of hybridity, Alberto Moreiras goes one or two steps further than Bhabha or Cornejo-Polar, steps that question the possibility of political intervention on the basis of hybridity. His argument is that the undecidability of the hybrid (again we have the emphasis not on an ‘organic hybrid’ but an ‘intentional hybrid’) pre-empts the grounding of any political position:

More than the site for ambivalence, hybridity, as diasporic ground or abyssal foundation for subjective constitution, is a nonsite or it is ambivalence itself. It is therefore not a place for subjective conciliation. On the contrary, it points to the conditions of possibility for the constitution of the sociopolitical subject as at the same time conditions of impossibility because the subject, through its constitutive, hybrid undecidability, is always already split. This is savage or nomadic hybridity: not what grounds a subject in an antagonistic relation to the state or capitalist domination, but precisely what ungrounds it, or the very principle of its ungrounding vis-à-vis any conceivable operation of state or social regime constitution. (Moreiras, 2001: 291)

If resistance depends on secure grounding (and one would need to undertake the difficult task of defining what the minimum conditions for grounding are), this argument radically undermines the key stance of several theorists of hybridisation according to which it is a vehicle for political intervention of some sort, and therefore much favoured in Latin American cultural studies.

A further problem with discussions of transculturation and hybridisation is the relation of the highlighted cultures and all the others in the world. If one casts one’s gaze around at those other cultures it is hard not to conclude that there are very few cultures which are not now hybrid. In which case, the discussion in writers such as Bhabha is actually about a particular effect of hybridisation and therefore possibly about something slightly different – not so much hybridisation as such but the way it
can function in colonial regimes. That difference is significant and draws attention to what for me is crucial but too often overlooked in this area and that is the need for precise work on specific case studies; frequently the discussions of transculturation and hybridisation are so general that key local factors and differentiations fail to be considered. Nikos Papastergiadis highlights this same view in Spivak: ‘Yet – to paraphrase Spivak in her corrective notes to other prominent radical theorists – this evocation of hybridity is “so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power”’ (Papastergiadis, 2000: 195).

It is in part because transculturation had some initial definition in its original introduction and theorisation by Fernando Ortiz (Ortiz, 2002 [1940]), and not because of any ideological or affective dimension deriving from a supposed Latin American ‘authenticity’, that it seems to me that it is worth returning to so as to begin reassessing this whole area of analysis. It may be a case of the least bad option, but transculturation is a more neutral, more simply technical term, carrying fewer connotations than hybridisation or any of the others. The concern I have with the term ‘hybridisation’ is that it comes with a good deal of freight connected with biological or genetic processes which can lead to problematic or unhelpful associations and metaphors, and with the possible implication that what went into the cultural mixing was in some way pure (or not already mixed). For the same reason of relative neutrality and because it does capture the sense of a combination of relatively autonomous but interrelated elements, I also favour the notion of counterpoint (similarly introduced to this area by Ortiz). Finally, there is a certain attraction in focusing on transculturation in that Ortiz coined the term in part as an act of resistance (precisely the impetus behind much of the writing in this area) to the then emergent hegemony of US ethnography and its deployment of the term acculturation, which Ortiz felt to be inadequate on technical grounds. And so, it is on the current state of thinking about transculturation that I will now concentrate.

Fernando Ortiz: Contrapunteo cubano

The first thing to be said about Ortiz in Contrapunteo cubano is that he is a reluctant theorist. This is quite a long book – the edited text of the 2002 edition [Cuban Counterpoint, 1940] I have used runs to 615 pages and they contain a wealth of detailed analysis and suggestive description. However, Ortiz gives over just seven pages to his chapter on the theory of transculturation (chapter II in the second part, Ortiz, 2002: 254–260), even though it is an idea underlying much of the book. He is quite clear that he is introducing the new term in order to replace the well-established ‘acculturation’, which he defines as meaning the process of transit from one culture to another more powerful one and the social repercussions resulting from that movement. His argument for the new term is that it expresses the highly varied phenomena that came about in Cuba as a result of complex transmutations of cultures, without appreciating which it is impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban people in key areas of social life.

---

5 For a detailed and thoughtful examination of the biological and racial aspects of the hybridisation of cultures, albeit not in a Latin American context, see Young (1995).
What is very striking in Ortiz’s discussion of transculturation – at least in his brief theoretical section – is the emphasis on human beings as the bearers of culture and frequently as the victims of cultural change. It is this human dimension which has often been overlooked in commentaries on both Ortiz and transculturation. He is at pains to establish the cultural diversity of both Spaniards and Africans coming to Cuba. He speaks of Spaniards ‘de distintas culturas’ [of distinct cultures] (Ortiz, 2002: 255), and that plural is evident again in his characterisation of the Africans arriving in Cuba, whom he describes as ‘de razas y culturas diversas’ [of diverse races and cultures] (Ortiz, 2002: 255). Moreover, he talks of the Spaniards as ‘torn’ (‘desgarrados’) from their peninsular societies and transplanted into an unknown situation demanding that they adjust to ‘un nuevo sincretismo de culturas’ [a new syncretism of cultures] (Ortiz, 2002: 255). This reference to the taxing experience for the Spaniards is quickly followed by a description of that of the Africans, who were ‘arrancados de sus núcleos sociales originarios y con sus culturas destrozadas, oprimidas bajo el peso de las culturas aquí imperantes, como las cañas de azúcar son molidas entre las mazas de los trapiches’ (Ortiz, 2002: 255). He makes it clear that, while there is a degree of comparability between Spaniards and Africans, the violence and suffering experienced by the Africans is greater than that of the Spaniards. It is implied that there are different intensities of transculturation according to social status, though this variety and unevenness are not explored further. In that respect it is tantalising that Ortiz does not say more about how the ‘destroyed’ cultures of the Africans then become involved in transmutations via contact with other cultures, but this is just one example of how the brevity of his discussion leaves areas of imprecision. Nonetheless, the implication here concerning varying forms of transculturation and its unevenness are points to which I shall return.

Ortiz stresses the sheer variety and fluidity of the movements involved, and so he speaks of ‘oleadas esporádicas’ [sporadic waves] and ‘manaderos continuos’ [continuous flows] of immigrant cultures, ‘siempre fluyentes e influyentes’ [ever flowing and influential] (Ortiz, 2002: 255). He finishes this crucial paragraph with a sentence summarising the major elements of the cultural experience which he is exploring: ‘cada inmigrante como un desarraigado de su tierra nativa en doble trance de desajuste y de reajuste, de decultura-ción o exculturación y de aculturación o inculturación, y al fin de síntesis, de transcultura-ción’ (Ortiz, 2002: 255). This sentence encapsulates both the human dimension and the cultural processes that he has been talking about. However, the bunching of terms here under one master term distinguished by the prefix ‘trans’ is somewhat confusing and does not fully correspond with a later passage defining transculturation. In this passage, the term seems to be an overarching description of different cultural processes involving radical loss (deculturation or exculturation) and movement to another culture (accluturation or incul-turation), but there is no mention of the vital later term ‘neoculturación’ (Ortiz, 2002: 260), a term which indicates the potentially creative aspect of cultural encounters. It is as if the end of the process here were the movement into another culture, in other words

---

6 Uprooted from their originary social nuclei and with their cultures destroyed, oppressed beneath the weight of the dominant cultures here, as the sugar canes are crushed between the rollers of the mills.

7 Every immigrant [is] like one uprooted from their native land in a double, critical moment of disjunction and realignment, of deculturation or exculturation and of acculturation or incul-turation, and in sum, of transculturation.
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 desgarre 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, 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
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. 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. 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 adapatation 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.

References


