

I. Transculturation, Syncretism, and Hybridity

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Transculturation (transculturation) is a term coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his canonical essay *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940). This term was a revision of the term *acculturation* introduced to US and British anthropology and social sciences by the Jewish Polish ethnographer Bronisław J. Malinowski in the 1920s and 1930s. The term appeared first in the work of US anthropologist J. W. Powell (1834–1902). Both theories were based in migration and migratory studies, and an analysis of the cultures of immigrant populations into the United States and Cuba. While acculturation¹ described the assimilation processes into US society, where European, African, and other immigrant populations learned English and assimilated into American society, *transculturation* addressed the complex processes of exchange—linguistic, economic, racial, gendered, and cultural—involved in these exchanges. For Ortiz, cultural assimilation was not a one-way process that involved one less powerful culture assimilating into a more powerful one, giving bicultural peoples a sense of “loss” as Malinowski’s proposed for US acculturation, but a two- or more way exchange of cultural influences, layering upon each other in complex processes of power, loss, and production. Ortiz notes that

el vocablo transculturación expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transitorio de una cultura a otra, porque éste no consiste solamente en adquirir una cultura, que es lo que en rigor indica la voz anglo-americana aculturación, sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial desculturación y, además, significa la consiguiente creación de los nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse *neoculturación*. (1991, ix)

the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation*

really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of a new phenomena, which could be called *neoculturation*. (Ortiz 1995b, 102–103)

Although Ortiz discusses the indigenous Native populations, European, African, Chinese and Mexican *yucateco* migrations to Cuba, he mainly focuses on what he describes as “white” (European) and “black” (African) “elements” of the Cuban population. Thus, he adds,

En mayor o menor disociación estuvieron en Cuba así los negros como los blancos. Todos convivientes arriba y 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. (Ortiz 1991, 90)

To a greater or lesser degree whites and Negroes were in the same state of disassociation in Cuba. All, those above, and those below, living together in the same atmosphere of terror and oppression, the oppressed in terror of punishment, the oppressor in terror of reprisals, all beside justice, beside adjustment, beside themselves. And all in the painful process of transculturation. (Ortiz 1995b, 102)

By putting European and African cultures as examples of what Ortiz described as “culturas desarraigadas” (uprooted cultures), he was elaborating on the history and social conditions of Cuba and by extension of Latin America. He was seeing Cuban history as a colonial-temporal conflict that shows, as Antonio Cornejo Polar has argued, “la actuación de sujetos sociales diferenciados y en contienda, instalados en ámbitos lingüísticos distintos, idiomáticos o dialectales y forjadores de racionalidades e imaginarios con frecuencia incompatibles” (1989, 22) (“the performance of different arguing social actors, installed in distinct linguistic, idiomatic, dialectal realms who forge rationalities and imaginaries that are frequently incompatible”). Transculturation appears then as a theory that, on the one hand, wants to represent this heterogeneity and, on the other hand, to reproduce a “re-conciliation” of difference. At the same time, it subverts Hegelian forms of “recognition” as it reproduces not a homogeneous subject fixed in its mastery but a more heterogeneous subject formation based in re-conciled difference. In this chapter I will trace the history of Fernando Ortiz’s transculturación, its dialogue with other terms such as syncretism and *hibridez*/hybridity, and how this notion has been used in literary cultural studies and the social sciences in Latin American Studies and the United States.

TRANSCULTURACIÓN: HISTORY OF A TERM

In Latin American and Caribbean literatures and cultures, Cornejo Polar has argued that the metaphor of the “libro que habla” (talking book) illustrates histories of violence, conflict, and inequality in colonial contexts. The