Amériques transculturelles - Transcultural Americas

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The definitions of “culture” in the Americas have certainly varied depending on different socio-historical contexts, but unlike modern European versions that place greater emphasis on the national dimension of the term, the specificity of the situation in the Americas has only been recently, that is in the 20th century, recognized in a typical definition capable of grasping their real continental identity. Given their own position towards European modernity, the originality of their culture, and of cultural evolution and development in the Americas, a definition was required that would correspond to their own historical development. And while a “national” definition of culture was developed throughout the Americas during the 19th century, parallel to that of European modernity’s institutions according to a model of homogenized ethnic and linguistic background, it is only through a contemporary redefinition of culture in the Americas that such a model was re-evaluated and criticized, taking into account the heritage of populations that were not previously included or were inadequately defined.
within the previous definitions of these national cultures. In what follows, I will examine this redefinition of culture in the Americas in the works of Fernando Ortiz (as well as Bronislaw Malinowski’s interpretation of Ortiz) and Néstor García Canclini, who respectively developed the concepts of transculturation and hybridization in order to provide a more inclusive perception of culture that addresses the issue of the originality of the Americas.

I will then refer to their respective conception and will briefly address different perspectives offered by “interculturalism” and “multiculturalism”, before arguing that the current contemporary context offers an opportunity to think about the cosmopolitan dimension of culture that transculturation and hybridization both imply. I will conclude by proposing that the very identity of culture in the Americas, that is, what stands as the identity of American culture, or “americanity”, should be defined according to the cosmopolitan dimension of culture that refers to both its transcultural and hybrid status.

Fernando Ortiz’s Concept of Transculturation

Fernando Ortiz first introduced the concept of transculturation as a methodological tool meant to synthesize the extensive and detailed analysis on the development of Cuban society and culture in his book, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, published in 1940. The book plays on the metonymic content of these two products—tobacco and sugar—as representing the whole history of Cuba in a fine quasi-structuralist mode: The system of oppositions that is constructed between the two figures extends to a reconstruction of the encounter between the European (Spanish), pre-Columbian (Taino Indians) and slave (African) cultures, came to embody the whole colonizing enterprise of the island of Cuba. By using the characteristics of the two plants, and their typically opposite agricultural practices (mass versus specialized), Ortiz demonstrates how the colonized Cuban society was built
through this “contrapuntal” dynamic that led to the synthesis of this metropolis-colony’s relations. The concept of transculturation is thus presented as an understanding of the typical processes at work between these oppositional traditions and practices, that is, as a give and take movement located within a cultural evolution in which former cultural traits form new cultural practices in the course of its transformation. Ortiz explains:

I have chosen the word transculturation to express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here, and without a knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban folk, either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of its life. (Ortiz, 98. Italics in the original.)

Therefore, Ortiz defines transculturation as a deep and all-encompassing process at work in every aspects of social life, all of which become “fusions” of diverse cultural horizons that are in contact at a given historical point in time. This process synthesizes the historical development of a Cuban culture which could well serve as a model to the entire hemispheric experience of the Americas. Ortiz writes:

The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations. First came the transculturation of the paleolithic Indian to the neolithic, and the disappearance of the latter because of his inability to adjust himself to the culture brought in by the Spaniards. Then the transculturation of an unbroken stream of white immigrants. They were Spaniards, but representatives of different cultures and themselves torn loose, to use the
phrase of the time, from the Iberian Peninsula groups and transplanted to a New World, where everything was new to them, nature and people, and where they had to readjust themselves to a new syncretism of cultures. At the same time there was going on the transculturation of a steady human stream of African Negroes coming from all the coastal regions of Africa along the Atlantic, from Senegal, Guinea, the Congo, and Angola and as far away as Mozambique on the opposite shore of that continent. All of them snatched from their original social groups, their own cultures destroyed and crushed under the weight of the culture in existence here, like sugar cane ground in the rollers of the mill. (Ortiz, 98)

Again, the transculturation process at work in Cuba is partly equivalent to that of many other contexts not only in Latin America (i.e., under the rule of the Spanish and Portuguese metropolitan empires, which brought together European, Indian, and African populations in a distinct context), but in North America as well, where the English and French empires were dealing at the time with similar situations (again, with due respect to the specificity of each context, since slavery, for instance, only existed as a prevalent and extended agricultural system in the Southern United States). For Ortiz, as mentioned earlier, it is not only the colonial period in Cuba that is characterized by this mixing of cultures it is a dynamic at work in the Americas that is permanently reworking cultural traditions of all kinds. He adds:

And still other immigrant cultures of the most varying origins arrived, either in sporadic waves or a continuous flow, always exerting an influence and being influenced in turn: Indians from the mainland, Jews, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxons, French, North Americans, even yellow Mongoloids from Macao, Canton, and other regions
of the sometime Celestial Kingdom. And each of them
torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem
of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and
acculturation—in a word, of transculturation. (Ortiz, 98)

Although Ortiz was ready to acknowledge that transcultu-
turation could vary in degrees, if not simply fall short of its
possible outcomes, he never really provided a detailed analysis
on the power relations that structured the process—if not in
showing that there was something “new” that emerged from the
context of cultural encounters. This is what mattered to him,
and the specificity of the history of the Americas remained, in
his own view, the “speed” at which the New World took shape,
culturally speaking, compared to Europe. After emphasizing
that the Americas finally engulfed “peoples from the four
quarters of the globe”, Ortiz concluded that: “They were all
coming to a new world, all on the way to a more or less rapid
process of transculturation” (Ortiz, 102). This meant that “[t]he
concept of transculturation is fundamental and indispensable
for an understanding of the history of Cuba, and, for analogous
reasons, of that of America in general” (Ortiz, 103). In the
end, Ortiz’s proposed a concept that added a new heuristic
value to the study of culture in the discipline of anthro-
pology, circumscribing the difficulties inherent in defining
both cultural evolution and cultural relations as a process of
ensuing phases:

I am of the opinion that 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 of
uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined
as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the
The concept of transculturation was not significantly used in the field, even though Bronislaw Malinowski, who was then at the peak of his academic accomplishments both in the United States and internationally, and was at that time establishing a functionalist “scientific definition” of culture, very enthusiastically supported its heuristic value in the introduction that he wrote for Ortiz’s book. While Malinowski himself is partly to blame by avoiding to use the concept in his later publications, between his personal encounter with Ortiz in Cuba in 1939 and before his death in 1942, there is little doubt that he praised the work of the Cuban anthropologist for assisting cultural analysts to think about cultural relations and cultural evolution in a new way. Seen by Malinowski as a concept opposed to “acculturation”, which up until then was used to describe in a moralistic fashion the uneven power relations between two
cultures put into contact through rather narrow evolutionistic and ethnocentric schemes, he praised the implications of Ortiz’s concept of transculturation and strongly encouraged its dissemination:

Every change of culture, or, as I shall say from now on, every transculturation, is a process in which something is always given in return for what one receives, a system of give and take. It is a process in which both parts of the equation are modified, a process from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex, a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of traits, nor even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent. To describe this process the word *transculturation*, stemming from Latin roots, provides us with a term that does not contain the implication of one certain culture toward which the other must tend, but an exchange between two cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share, and both co-operating to bring about a new reality of civilization. (Malinowski, lviii–lix. Italics in the original.)

Malinowski immediately saw in Ortiz’s work a new way of understanding the evolution of culture in general, in its formation and transformation processes, but took special note of the way culture took shape in the Americas, based on the analysis of the Cuban case provided by Ortiz. As Malinowski stated:

It would be as preposterous to suggest that the Spaniards who settled in Cuba became “acculturated”—that is, assimilated—to the Indian cultures, as it would be to affirm that they did not receive from the natives very tangible and definite influences. It will suffice to read this account of tobacco and sugar to realize how the
Spaniards acquired from the Indians one of the two basic elements of the new civilization they were to develop in Cuba during the four centuries of their domination, and how the other was brought in by them to this island of America from across the ocean. There was an exchange of important factors, a transculturation, in which the chief determining forces were the new habitat as well as the old traits of both cultures, the interplay of economic factors peculiar to the New World as well as a new social organization of labor, capital, and enterprise. (Malinowski, lix. Italics in the originals.)

For Malinowski, this process of transculturation did not exclusively belong to the past, but could help define the continuous relations that Europe and the Americas would develop throughout history and beyond the episode of the Conquest and the colonial period. Subsequent waves of migrations between the two continents would continue to deepen and further the process of transculturation, not only in Cuba, but elsewhere and throughout all the Americas:

The essential nature of the process being described is not the passive adaptation to a clear and determined standard of culture. Unquestionably any group of immigrants coming from Europe to America suffers changes in its original culture; but it also provokes a change in the mold of the culture that receives them. Germans, Italians, Poles, Irish, Spaniards always bring with them when they transmigrate to the nations of America something of their own culture, their own eating habits, their folk melodies, their musical taste, their language, customs, superstitions, ideas, and temperament. (Malinowski, lviii)

Malinowski’s enthusiastic support of Ortiz’s concept certainly bore personal undertones for this former Polish immigrant
(first to England, and then to the United States), but what is even more striking is his support for a political recognition of the consequences of a concept like transculturation in the Americas’ hemispheric relations. Taking into account the hegemonic or even imperialistic role that the United States had come to play in Cuba and in Latin America in general, as well as the ideological stream of the “good neighbour policy” of the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s, Malinowski called for an understanding of the larger ethical implications of transculturation at the end of his introduction:

With these scientific efforts of study and analysis of the objective realities through which the complex social phenomena of peoples reveal themselves, the understanding between the Americas would become greater, more perfect, and more fruitful the goodwill of the North Americans toward Cuba, the most important and closest of her island neighbors of Latin America. It is obvious that here, as in every phase or phenomenon of transculturation, the influences and understanding would be mutual, as would the benefits. (Malinowski, lxiv)

The fact that this statement went far beyond the implications that Ortiz himself saw in his own study, since it did not fully capture the deeper implications of the concept of transculturation (as Coronil claims), does reveal the potential of the concept had it been utilized and fully developed at that time and into the present day. But such was not the case, and the ideological context immediately following World War II and extending throughout the Cold War’s US politics toward Cuba and Latin America in particular, combined with the disciplinary (or rather “un-disciplinary”) consequences of Malinowski’s involvement in Ortiz’s work, sounded the death knell of transculturation’s heuristic value.
While disciplinary and ideological circumstances prevented Ortiz’s concept of transculturation from being disseminated, it is interesting to note that at the very end of the Cold War period, another concept would emerge that would, to some extent, compete with what Ortiz wished to convey in his studies of culture. It is with this idea in mind that we now turn to a brief examination of Néstor García Canclini’s concept of hybridization, which is in a way a substitute to the concept of transculturation, though in a different context and with slightly different implications.

**Néstor García Canclini’s Concept of Hybridization**

The original Spanish version of Néstor García Canclini’s book, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, was published in 1989. While its publication fortuitously coincided with the official end of the Cold War, epitomized by the fall of the Berlin wall that same year (though it cannot be overemphasized), it was certainly meaningful in terms of the new context of globalization, an era fuelled by neoliberal ideological representations that was soon to emerge under the label of the “new world order” promoted by the United States as the typical way of envisioning the evolution—if not the end—of world history. As the first section of the book makes clear, in García Canclini’s view, the socio-historical context of Latin America calls for a new kind of analysis:

What are the strategies for entering and leaving modernity in the nineties? We phrase the question in this way because in Latin America, where traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived, we doubt that the primary objective should be to modernize us, as politicians, economists, and the publicity of new technologies proclaim. Other sectors, upon verifying that salaries are returning to the power
that they had two decades ago and the products of the most prosperous countries—Argentina, Brazil, Mexico—remained stagnant during the eighties, ask themselves if modernization is not becoming inaccessible for the majority. And it is also possible to think that to be modern no longer makes sense at this time in that the philosophies of postmodernity disqualify the cultural movements that promise utopias and foster progress. (García Canclini, 1)

It is with this context in mind that García Canclini introduces the concept of hybridization, a term that lays the foundation for interdisciplinary (or transdisciplinary) studies that cut across anthropology, art history and communication studies (together with sociology, cultural studies and semiotics) and for a new understanding of culture that acknowledges the fractures between its popular, massified and “cultivated” versions. As he puts it:

We have, then, three questions at issue. How to study the hybrid cultures that constitute modernity and give its specific profile in Latin America. Next, to reunite the partial knowledges of the disciplines that are concerned with culture in order to see if it is possible to develop a more plausible interpretation of the contradictions and failures of our modernization. And third, what to do—when modernity has become a polemical or suspect project—with this mixture of heterogeneous memory and truncated innovations. (García Canclini, 3)

While it might seem at first that the concept developed by García Canclini somewhat opposes Ortiz’s, the latter emphasizing the fusions of different cultural horizons in the formation of new “homogenized” forms through transculturation, whereas the former stresses the separations that still
prevail between different sectors of a falsely presumed unified modern culture, the two concepts are in fact more similar than they appear. For García Canclini, “hybridization” means a process through which different cultural areas and practices are coming together and defining new cultural forms—according to the common meaning of the word “hybrid”\textsuperscript{8}. Indeed, in the new introduction written for the second edition of \textit{Hybrid Cultures} published in 2005, in order to clarify some of the questions that the use of the notion had raised in various debates since the publication of the first edition of the book, García Canclini mentions that “transculturation” is part of the “network of concepts” to which hybridization also belongs, together with other notions such as creolization, mestizaje, etc\textsuperscript{9}. While neither the work nor the name of Fernando Ortiz explicitly appears as a reference in \textit{Hybrid Cultures}, due to its limited circulation, making it virtually unknown for decades in academic circles\textsuperscript{10}—which did not escape the attention of Fernando Coronil\textsuperscript{11}—there are better reasons that might explain the differences between the two authors, and that justify the use of these different concepts developed by each in their respective analysis. First, bear in mind that Ortiz was essentially concerned with the historical evolution of culture in Cuba and the Americas up until the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, whereas García Canclini focuses on the evolution of culture in Latin America from the late 20\textsuperscript{th} to the present. This does not prevent one from recognizing that there are differences between the two perspectives. García Canclini’s analysis presupposes that there have been continuous fractures between different areas of cultural practices that maintain, for instance, traditional domains of culture in the face of modern cultural developments, thereby impeding recognition of the successful transculturation that Ortiz assumed to have occurred in this context. Second, García Canclini is deeply concerned with the contemporary context of “globalization”, whereas Ortiz was producing his own analysis of Cuban society in the time span of time between
the two world wars, when there was still some possibility of developing national societies\textsuperscript{12}—or so it would seem. The fact that Ortiz sided with the Cuban Revolution of 1959 (he died in 1969), seeing it as a sign of a new transculturation process, which still meant a social dynamic linked to a version of the emancipatory dimension of the project of modernity, can appear to contradict García Canclini’s own position towards Latin American societies and the historical trajectory of the contemporary world, since the very motivation of his own work lies in the fact that Latin America is facing a postmodern condition that, at best, puts the very idea of modernity at risk\textsuperscript{13}. In spite of these differences, however, both Ortiz’s concept of transculturation and García Canclini’s concept of hybridization are reconcilable with regards to the significance of modernity in the Americas. It is indeed according to the displacement and the critique that they each provide on the particular significance of modernity in the American context that we get the best picture of how culture would be defined in this situation, given the originality of this socio-historical setting. Indeed, for both, modernity in the Americas should be defined according to an evaluation of culture that emphasizes a process of heavy mixing of cultural sources and horizons that need to be understood as a process of transformation, which can never develop a “pure” national identity, at least, not in the European sense.

I would therefore argue that the concept of hybridization shares some elements with the definition of transculturation, and \textit{vice versa}, to the extent that they both imply a transformation of culture that involves different sources and horizons in the development of new forms of cultural practices. On the other hand, the particular use of the concept of hybridization that García Canclini shares with various authors covers a wide range of different phenomena. Its specific value lies in its capacity to broaden our conception of the contemporary evolution of culture, inasmuch as this evolution embraces past, present or future contexts. As García Canclini puts it:
I understand for hybridization socio-cultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices. In turn, it bears nothing that the so-called discrete structures were a result of prior hybridizations and therefore cannot be considered pure points of origin. (...) One way of describing this movement from the discrete to the hybrid, and to new discrete forms, is the “cycle of hybridization” formula proposed by Brian Stross, according to which we move historically from more heterogeneous forms to other more homogeneous ones, and then to other relatively more heterogeneous forms, without any being “purely” or simply homogeneous. (García Canclini, xxv. Italics in the original.)

In addition, closer to Ortiz’s view on transculturation, García Canclini’s hybridization concept can be applied to the analysis of varied phenomena, that can embrace past historical situations (like the colonial context of the Americas) and contemporary manifestations of cultural transformation (such as the effects of globalization in terms of media development and mass tourism). What is really at stake is the capacity to see the formation and transformation of cultural identity by recognizing the participation of all horizons and sources involved in such processes. The concept thus finds a trans-disciplinary relevance as well as a very general field of application:

The social (Hall; Papastergiadis) and linguistic (Bakhtin; Bhabha) constructions of the concept of hybridization have made possible a departure from the biological and essentialist discourses of cultural identity, authenticity, and purity. This contributes to identifying and accounting for fertile alliances: for example, of the pre-Columbian imaginary with that of the colonizers of New Spain, and later with that of the culture industries
(Bernand, Gruzinski), between popular and tourist aesthetics (De Grandis), of national ethnic cultures with metropolitan cultures (Bhabha), and with global institutions (Harvey). The few written fragments of a history of hybridizations have made evident the productivity and innovative power of many cross-cultural mixtures. (García Canclini, xxvii)

While it is up to cultural analysts in the various disciplines to gauge the conceptual value of hybridization processes in creating a better perception of phenomena according to this opening of perspective, the political dimension of these developments should not be underestimated. If globalization is the general socio-historical context into which hybridization is occurring to large extent, particularly by the spread of mass communications and culture, then the neoliberal ideology that promotes free trade and free trade agreements worldwide and induces concrete forms of their realization can also be reformed, taking into account more democratic concerns. Indeed, if hybridization means the coming together of different sources and horizons of cultural practices into new forms of determination, then openly recognizing broader participation by all citizens to the formation and transformation of culture logically requires that the political arena becomes accessible to all. It is in this sense that García Canclini asks:

Is it possible to democratize not only the access to goods but the capacity for hybridizing them, to combine the multicultural repertoires expanded by these global times? The answer depends, above all, on political and economic action. Along these lines, I want to foreground the urgency of attaching to free-trade agreements regulations that order and strengthen transnational public space. Among other requirements for such a state of affairs is that we globalize citizen rights, that multinational hybridizations derived from mass
migrations find recognition in a more open conception of citizenship, capable of embracing multiple forms of belonging. (García Canclini, xli)

It therefore seems that transculturation and hybridization have more in common than their respective definitions allow. First and foremost, the perception of culture in terms of this process of transformation that occurs when different cultural practices are blended, suggests the recognition of a wider participation than the one engaged in defining national cultures in their former context. As Ortiz has shown, the colonial and national contexts of Cuban and American societies reveal the complex relations of diverse sources of culture, and, as García Canclini tells us, the present and future evolution of globalization requires a broader understanding of cultural relations. What does this tell us about the definition of culture in the Americas? The development of these concepts reveals that intense efforts are being made to think about culture in the Americas according to a new frame of mind, and that this casts doubt on the validity of former definitions of culture inherited from the modern European model of homogenized national spaces. This suggests that numerous debates can arise out of such a reflection. I will now briefly examine two recent currents of analysis and demonstrate how they intersect with the concept of transculturation and hybridization, and how analytical debates arise according to the direction in which they develop. To what extent are discussions on interculturalism and multiculturalism connected with the new frame of mind required to analyze culture in the Americas?

The recognition of American Culture: Interculturalism or Multiculturalism?

The real division in the definition of culture in the Americas only manifests itself in its contemporary context, in the wake
of American imperialism that emerged at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century. Beforehand, culture was defined from the European point of view (in the colonial context), and according to the model of European modernity (in the national period following the wars of independence in the Americas). Since then, the development of a new type of society (i.e. mass society, very different from modern bourgeois society), coupled with a new form of political domination of international dimensions (i.e. U.S. imperialism instead of European imperialism), required a redefinition of culture that would provide new ways of categorizing cultural practices. In the early 20th century, for instance, expressions such as “melting pot”, or “nation of nations”, were used to define a new national identity in the U.S.—whereas in the late 19th century, poets such as Walt Whitman and José Martí had already expressed their visions about the international content of culture in the Americas. Interestingly, we have not yet overcome the problem of reflecting on the specific definition of culture in the Americas. Both Ortiz and García Canclini, through their respective conceptualization of transculturation and hybridization, participated as others have done in proposing notions such as “interculturalism” and “multiculturalism”. To what extent do these notions intersect with the conceptual developments that we touched on so far?

In his book, *The New North American Studies: Culture, Writings and the Politics of Re/Cognition*, Winfried Siemerling argues that although multiculturalism openly promoted by both the governments of the United States and Canada since the 1960s has played an active and valuable role in enabling cultural differences to be expressed in each society, it has so far failed to play a significant role in analyzing culture beyond the national dimension of cultural identity. While Siemerling convincingly demonstrates that the analysis of diverse literatures from North America, such as African-American, Native American, or French Québécois, for example, requires a reworking of the
definition of what a “national culture” is, he argues that a real and significant opening can only occur through a cross-cultural dialogue based on the recognition of the differences that is opposed to any kind of “closed off” identity. From his point of view, it is the uncomfortable position of “double consciousness”, exemplified by W.E.B. Du Bois in the search for an “African-American” identity structured around its hyphenated definition that best corresponds to what multiculturalism really is. Confronting Charles Taylor’s idea of complete recognition achieved by the politics of multiculturalism, Siemerling attempts to test the limits of such a recognition by showing that it can never be achieved other than by maintaining openness with regards to the irreducible differences involved. Notwithstanding how the diversity of cultural expressions have structured the situation contexts that Siemerling examines both in the United States and Canada, what is really at stake here is the possibility of finding and defining the common ground from which this diversity emerged. After all, these cultural differences could only exist and manifest themselves according to an “American identity”, the same one that denied their very formation within the context of their national existence. But if we consider these various formations as the resulting from the dynamics of transculturation and hybridization that define culture in the Americas, then the problem becomes one of developing a concept of culture in the Americas that considers how the diverse sources and different horizons of cultural practices participate in the formation and transformation of the American (continental) identity as a whole, and which allows the “national” dimension of things as part of a much larger and deeper process—involving United States imperialism in particular.

A somewhat similar position is articulated in Walter Mignolo’s book, *The Idea of Latin America*. Mignolo takes the issue of interculturalism, rather than multiculturalism, as being the way of redefining the cultural components of the
Americas. Conceived as a more radical shift that implies “the opening of an epistemology of the borders built on the colonial difference” (Mignolo, 107), interculturalism would invert the historical movement of modernity by returning to the sources of Indigenous knowledge and cultures, in such a way that is incompatible with any of the compromises found in the sort of multiculturalism that favours the various national states of the Americas—from North to South. At the core of this analytical position that Mignolo develops in minute details elsewhere, lies a reconsideration of the epistemology of modern European society that had been transposed in the American context through the annihilation of Indigenous cultures, and the capacity of reinventing the vital sources of these cultures in line with a clear and definite political project. What is intriguing here, is to discover how such an evolution could be possible, given that, on the one hand, forms of knowledge as well as any other cultural form take place within a specific society and cannot be abstracted from it, and on the other, it is impossible to think about the evolution of indigenous cultures without considering the socio-historical experience that has taken form in their relations with European, as well as African, and other cultures that existed in the Americas in the last five centuries.

While Mignolo and Siemerling’s respective positions deserve better treatment and critical appraisal than the one I can offer here, due to a lack of space, I think that what is important to both remains clear enough. All the authors that have been discussed here tried to achieve, each in his own way, a redefinition of culture in the Americas that move beyond the limitations that have characterized the modern versions inherited from European modernity. Yet, all of them are in favour of a broader and more inclusive definition of culture, both on the historical and contemporary levels. Interculturalism and multiculturalism both appear to exclude parts of the reality of cultural practices in the Americas, whereas transculturation and hybridization are conceptually better, precisely because they are more inclusive.
Conclusion

It seems to me that the true definition of culture in the Americas came to reach a turning point in the 20th century when their own originality emerged. This is due to the historical experiences that the Americas have in common share, and because this involves recognizing the variety of sources and horizons of cultural practices that fuelled the constitution of various national societies and institutions. Ortiz’s concept of transculturation established a landmark, and García Canclini’s concept of hybridization reshaped parts of the concept of transculturation so that it better fits into the current context. When we consider Siemerling’s concern with multiculturalism and Mignolo’s attempt at defining interculturalism to deal with specific issues, we see how further debates might provide analytical directions that intersect with the former concepts. It seems to me that these directions are to some extent compatible with the need to think about culture in the Americas in such a way that it recognizes the existence of national contexts for evolving cultural practices without restricting their definition to these contexts. The implications of redefining culture in the Americas are numerous because both transculturation and hybridization call for new version in the current postmodern context, carefully taking into account the cosmopolitan dimension of these conceptual visions of culture. Insofar as it relates to the politics of multiculturalism and interculturalism, including these concepts into a rework definition of culture that is opposed to a strictly imperial domination from the United States, a cosmopolitan understanding of culture in the Americas would then broaden the horizon in terms of both the legacy of European modernity in the Americas and the present limitations. Indeed, the postmodern habit of revising the specificity of modernity in the Americas helps us to consider both the analytical importance of the conceptual approaches that we utilize and the political horizon in
which they develop, repositioning cultural practices in our continental evolution.

Cited References


Notes


2 He writes: “If the Indies of America were a New World for the Europeans, Europe was a far newer world for the people of America. They were two worlds that discovered each other and collided head-on. The impact of the two on each other was terrible. One of them perished, as though struck by lightning. It was a transculturation that failed as far as the natives were concerned, and was profound and cruel for the new arrivals. The aboriginal human basis of society was destroyed in Cuba, and it was necessary to bring in a complete new population, both masters and servants. This is one of the strange social features of Cuba, that since the sixteenth century all its classes, races, and cultures, coming in by will or by force, have all been exogenous and have all been torn from their places of origins, suffering the shock of this first uprooting and a harsh transplanting.” (Ortiz, 100).

3 Of course Ortiz pays attention to the dominant mode of capitalist production in this evolution, when he writes: “Cuba
had two parallel sources of pride, the synthesis of this strange contrast I have outlined, that of being the country that produced sugar in the greatest quantity and tobacco of the finest quality. The first is disappearing; nobody can take away the second. We have seen the fundamental differences that existed between them from the beginning until machines and capitalism gradually ironed out these differences, dehumanized their economy, and made their problems more and more similar.” (Ortiz, 92–93)

He writes: “The whole gamut of culture run by Europe in a span of more than four millenniums took place in Cuba in less than four centuries. In Europe the change was step by step; here it was leaps and bounds.” (Ortiz, 99)

Here I am following the lines of the excellent presentation to the new English edition of Ortiz’s book provided by Fernando Coronil “Transculturation and the Politics of Theory: Countering the Center, Cuban Counterpoint” (ix–lvi).

In his evaluation of Malinowski’s relation to Ortiz, Coronil insists that the former “took” as much credit as he gave to the former, in including him among the fellow functionalist anthropologists (Coronil, p. xxxi, xxxv, xliii). Coronil would also write: “[Malinowski] reads transculturation narrowly as a technical term that expresses certain dynamics in cultural exchanges, not as a critical category intended to reorient both the ethnography of the Americas and anthropological theory.” (Coronil, 2005, 145. Italics in the original.) Without arguing that this simple statement makes Ortiz a “happy functionalist” anthropologist, and a mere follower of Malinowski’s anthropological theory, one can think about Coronil’s remarks with a milder impression of the intellectual and scientific relations that both men shared.

As it turns out, the Oxford English Dictionary credited Malinowski, and not Ortiz, with the introduction of the term “transculturation”; this was due to the fact that when Malinowski’s book, A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays, was posthumously published in 1944, he used the concept without attributing it to Ortiz, although he had apparently revised the part of the manuscript containing the reference before his death, as Fernando Coronil reports (Coronil, pp. xlv–xlvi).
As he states: “Occasional mention will be made of the terms *syncretism*, *mestizaje*, and others used to designate processes of *hybridization*. I prefer this last term because it includes diverse intercultural mixtures—not only racial ones to which *mestizaje* tends to be limited—and because it permits the inclusion of the modern forms of hybridization better than does “syncretism”, a term that almost always refers to religious fusions or traditional symbolic movements.” (García Canclini, 11, note 1. Italics in the original.)

He writes: “If we want to go beyond liberating cultural analysis from its fundamentalist identitarian tropes, we must position hybridization in another network of concepts: for example, contradiction, *mestizaje*, syncretism, transculturation, and creolization. It is also necessary to understand it in the context of the ambivalences of the globalized mass diffusion and industrialization of symbolic processes, and of the power conflicts these provoke.” (García Canclini, xxix. Italics in the original.)

Néstor García Canclini was not aware of Ortiz’s book when he published *Hybrid Cultures* in 1989, except through a vague reference that also bore the traces of the more controversial early works of Fernando Ortiz on the “racialized” dimension of crime in Cuba. I got this information from a personal conversation with Néstor García Canclini, in Mexico City on June 27, 2008.

Coronil makes this reference to García Canclini’s book while reviewing the virtual absence of Fernando Ortiz’s works in various analyses produced on Latin America, accentuating his marginal place in anthropology in general (Coronil, xxxvi). In my view, there are reasons other than the ones evoked by Coronil to explain Ortiz’s marginalization in the field of anthropology: the rise of Levi-Strauss’ structuralism in the 1950s and 60s, as well as the subsequent wave of post-structuralism, together with the “turn to interpretation” in anthropology in the late 1970s in the United States, should also be taken into consideration.

Rafael Rojas writes: “Ortiz’s legacy envelops the mystery of a fully modern intellectual adventure in the Caribbean and even in Spanish America. This notion of modernity is put to the test in what Habermas would call the dialectics between the
self-assurance of having a place in the world and the ability to move to other epistemological latitudes.” (Rojas, 65).

As for Ortiz’s intellectual and political dispositions, the following evaluation is instructive: “[Ortiz’s] work implies that cultural fixations—traditions, legacies, beliefs, and practices—serve as the basis for stable group and national identities, and require in-depth study. This concept of transculturation pointed to a constant give-and-take across primary cultural traditions. Race and national identity were themselves socially constructed categories in cultural flux. As a result, a key aspect of Ortiz’s approach is its unwillingness to resolve such tension and dissolve cultural counterpoints. Indeterminacy is present in Ortiz’s treatment of the relationship of the cultural with the economic and the historical. Thus, he left with an image of social organization and culture as a perennial problematic. It is telling in this regard that in his waning years during the 1960s, he would see the revolutionary process of that decade as “crisis of transculturation.” (Font, Quiroz, Smorkaloff, xv)

I examined some aspects of these questions in J.F. Côté (2001).

In discussing Charles Taylor’s model developed in the “politics of recognition” of multiculturalism, Siemerling writes: “I do not believe that in strong formulations of multiculturalism and in multicultural canon debates requests are made to deliver automatically positive value judgments that would imply, in this sense, one unitary perspective and value standard for all sides involved; the difference of perspective could be taken, in fact, to be the very point of multiculturalism. The implication is that processes of self-certainty and self-certification are different, and signify differently: if there are several perspectives—not one—from which “we struggle toward a wider understanding which can englobe the other undistortively [Taylor],” then there are clearly several “we”s, and the remainders in the hermeneutics of cross-cultural dialogue may not dissolve in reciprocal self-mediation that can be transparently and identically retraced and recognized from all sides.” (Siemerling, 143)

Siemerling writes: “By contrasting contexts in which cultural emergence and difference are articulated and differing strains of
multicultural genealogies develop, comparative explorations …
can make different codings of cultural difference conspicuous,
and foster alternative conjugations of the inevitably necessary if
projective confirmations and conformities of recognition with
the equally urgent cognitive chances of re-cognition." Siemerling
argues in this sense because, for him, and as he states, “… despite
all necessary strikes against difference, forms of universalism risk,
as ever before, being defrocked as disguised particularisms. The
need to diminish and abolish non-equalitarian difference is thus
persistently conjoined and contradicted by the wish to accentuate
specificity in a non-homogenized culture of relation.” (Siemerling,
152, 153) While I do agree with him on the inadequate form of
universalism that prevails in the definition of American culture,
I do think that this is the problem, and that the way of avoiding
it is not to shy way from it.

As Mignolo puts it: “”Interculturalidad” doesn’t mean speaking
the same logic in two different languages, but putting into collabora-
tive conversation two different logics for the good of all. For
the state, “interculturalidad” thus understood is not convenient.
Therefore, the state promotes an idea of “multicultural” society
(albeit sometimes the state uses the word “intercultural”, which
still means “multicultural”, indeed). What is the difference?
“Multicultural” means that the hegemonic principles of
knowledge, education, the concept of the state and government,
political economy, morality, etc., are controlled by the state, and
below the control of the state people have “freedom” to go with
their “cultures” as far as they do not challenge “the epistemic
principles” grounding politics, economy, and ethics as managed
by the state. “Interculturalidad”, instead, as used in Indigenous
political projects, means that there are two distinct cosmologies
at work, Western and Indigenous. (…) “Interculturalidad”, in
its broader sense, is the radical claim, by Indigenous people, of
their “epistemic rights”, which are quite different from “cultural
rights”. “Cultural rights” are celebrated by the state, in Ecuador
and in the US. (…) Instead, “interculturalidad” would lead to
a pluri-cultural state with more than one valid cosmology. And
“pluri-culturalidad”, at the level of knowledge, of political theory
and economy, of ethics and aesthetics, is the utopian goal toward which to build, a new society constructed over the cracks and the erosions of the liberal and republican state.” (Mignolo, 118–119, 120) Walter Mignolo also developed more extensively these ideas in his book *Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2000.