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Transculturation and the porosity of cultures: Fernando Ortiz

Robert Bernasconi 

Department of Philosophy, Penn State University, University Park, PA, USA

Email: rlb43@psu.edu

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Abstract

Fernando Ortiz introduced his account of transculturation to replace Melville Herskovits's notion of acculturation as a way of describing the historical contact between cultures. Ortiz understood the idea of acculturation to be promoting a kind of assimilationist model very different from what he witnessed in his native Cuba. Transculturation conforms neither to the model of cosmopolitanism promoted by Kant's universal history, nor to the kind of multiculturalism that is rooted in Herder's rival approach to history. Instead, it presents a concept of cultural contact and cultural transformation that highlights the way the material and economic conditions of social existence shape the institutions in which cultures more narrowly conceived are embedded and relate to each other. By bringing transculturation into dialogue with the idea of the porosity of cultures initially promoted in 1925 by Walter Benjamin in his essay on Naples, we find a way to free transculturation from Ortiz's tendency to lapse into biological metaphors with the danger of retaining a reference to cultural purity that he would not endorse. Transculturation, thus revised, recommends itself as a term helpful for thinking about a world shaped by mass migration and the new technological forms of ever more rapid cultural exchange. Properly understood, it promotes a future where openness and sharing are valued over ownership and preservation.

Keywords: transculturation; porosity of cultures; Fernando Ortiz

What are we talking about when we reference 'transculturation'? And why is this term, which was introduced more than 60 years ago and has for some time has been attracting widespread attention from cultural theorists, only now receiving attention from philosophers? What is it that this term was introduced to say that was not being said by other terms, such as *acculturation* and *multiculturalism*? I insist on this last question because it sometimes seems that the word *transculturality* is being used as a synonym for one or other of these two words, which would render its introduction redundant. The phrase 'transcultural values' can sound like an appeal to shared values that are

putatively universal. The phrase ‘transcultural dialogue’, by contrast, seems to highlight the benefits of communicating across cultures that hold different values from one’s own in a climate where each set of values is respected but separate. But the two phrases appear to point in two different directions: the first phrase emphasizes sameness, while the second highlights difference. But, however valuable each of these processes might be in their place – some values are shared; dialogue across differences is valuable – to use the same word to describe them sows confusion. Furthermore, neither usage retains the original impulse that led to the introduction of the word *transculturation* in all its distinctiveness. It was introduced to make an entirely different point, and I want to start by identifying the circumstances of its introduction.

The term *transculturation* was coined by Fernando Ortiz, the Cuban anthropologist. It first found its way into print in his 1940 study *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Ortiz: 1940: 137).¹ Although Ortiz spent some six pages in the second part of the book explicitly trying to establish the value of the concept of transculturation and although he refined it subsequently in some essays, he was not much concerned to promote its general application. His focus was concentrated on the history of Cuba and what he described was a process of successive waves of immigration to that country that – and this for him was the decisive point – did not lead to one culture eradicating the others: rather they continuously intermeshed in such a way that none of the constituent cultures were left the same. This ongoing dynamic process could readily be documented in the Cuban context because of the multiple elements that interacted over a relatively short space of time. He supplied this list: ‘Ciboney, Taino, Spaniard, Jew, English, French, Anglo-American, Negro, Yucatee, Chinese and Creole’ (Ortiz 1995: 99). But, of course, each of these in itself needs to be understood to have been formed transculturally. *Transculturation* is a term whose function is to highlight the way cultures are transformed through their interaction with each other.

I am returning to Ortiz’s neologism *transculturation* because, although he framed it as a response to his contemporaries, it also serves in ways that he might not have recognized as ways to leave behind the debates that have preoccupied philosophers of history in Europe from the late eighteenth century to our own times.² A first aspect of this is clearly visible in how he introduced transculturation: he believed that the term *acculturation* that was gaining in popularity was incapable of capturing ‘the extremely complex transmutations of culture’ that had taken place in Cuba’s history (Ortiz 1995: 98). The word *acculturation* suggested to him a historical process whereby one culture loses out as people who share that culture assimilate to another more dominant culture. This makes it seem that the dominant culture remains the same through that process. Melville Herskovits, who had advocated for the word *acculturation* and practiced it as a method, was aware of this danger and criticized it in others (1937: 323–325;

¹This book went through a number of different editions. The definitive edition is said to be Ortiz 1963 (Firmat 1989: 59). The English translation was based on the first edition and is far from complete, reducing some 500 pages to just over 300.

²Ortiz was not always as resolute as he might have been in divorcing himself from these longstanding debates. At one point he seemed to suggest that transculturation encompasses the process of deculturation and acculturation, a suggestion that seems to leave intact the very process he was questioning (1995: 98). At other points his departure from multiculturalism seems incomplete, notably when he occasionally slips into talking about distinct cultures as if each had a clear identity in and of itself.

1938: 90), but Ortiz, who had become sensitive to the role played by power, control, and inequality in the study of culture contact, had his own agenda. He wanted to identify resources that would resist the Americanization of Cuba as it was taking place in the middle of the 20th century. He found these resources in Cuba's history and especially in the Afro-Cuban population (Davies 2000: 142, 149).

This model of acculturation that Ortiz sought to challenge reflected one powerful strand of European thinking from the late 18th century onwards. One can think, for example, of the introduction of the word *civilization* by the Marquis de Mirabeau in 1757, its adoption by the Scottish moral philosophers beginning with Adam Ferguson in 1767, and the crimes that were committed in the name of civilization as colonizers appealed to its implied reference to a hierarchy of cultures to justify slavery, forced conversions, and the removal of indigenous peoples from their lands (Bernasconi 2025, forthcoming). The word *civilization* never caught on in the same way in Germany as it did in France and Britain, but one finds echoes of the same process in Immanuel Kant's promotion of cosmopolitanism in his 1784 essay 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim', in which he declared that in order to justify nature in the sense of providence it was imperative to understand history in such a way that 'our part of the world' would give laws to all the others (Kant 2007a: 119). This implicitly imposes on those societies that declare themselves to be the most advanced the task of policing the world, in accord with their own values. Ortiz's recognition of the value of Afro-Cuban culture, and especially its musical forms that he scrupulously documented, would not allow him to see Cuba from this perspective.³

Kant followed his 'Idea for a Universal History' with a negative review of the first volume of Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (Kant 2007b). In the second volume, Herder responded to Kant's Eurocentrism with his conception of *Humanität* as every people finding its own standard of happiness within it, with the implication that the loss of a people and its culture amounted to a loss to humanity at large (Herder 1785: 206). Herder can thus be understood as an opponent of acculturation, as I have just described it, and his account served as the inspiration in the late 20th century for many of the advocates of multiculturalism. But Ortiz did not advocate multiculturalism any more than he advocated acculturation.⁴ When Ortiz declared that 'the real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturalizations' he meant that it exhibited what he called 'a new syncretism of cultures' (Ortiz 1995: 98). Multiculturalism, in the sense of a policy that seeks to sustain distinct and separate cultural groups, can take place as an effort to respond to the process Ortiz calls transculturation.

Ortiz's conception of transculturation challenged the distorted view of history that emerges if one starts out with the assumption about the purity of cultures, their homogenization. That assumption leads to political programs whereby political

³Especially in some early essays, he used the word *civilization* in a problematic way that seemed to put it in conflict with the valuation he wanted to place on Afro-Cuban culture. More egregious still is a 1906 essay in which he apparently wanted immigration restricted to Northern Europeans because other races would increase Cuban criminality. See Helg 1995: 104 and Kravagna 2013: 40.

⁴For a different attempt to differentiate transculturalism from Herderian multiculturalism, see Welsch 1999: 194-195. Strictly speaking, although indebted to Ortiz, Welsch is concerned with *transculturality*, which is his own neologism: see Reichardt 2020: 74-76.

parties seek, for example, to restrict immigration with the express aim to protect a cultural identity understood as something given and static that needs protection. So much hatred in the world today is fostered by this illusion: one sees it in the so-called Great Replacement Theory. One sees it, for example, also in Britain where I was born and spent the first half of my life. What could be more syncretic than British culture? What possibly could be meant by the purity of British culture when the very idea of Britain even in its most simple articulation emerges from the coming together of the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish? Not to mention the Vikings and the Normans, among others. Since the Second World War Britain has been further enriched by immigration from its former colonies, albeit again as a result of a violent history. The task is to look beyond the idea of cultural purity without resorting to a notion of impurity, which remains stuck in the same orbit.

Ortiz did not locate the process of transculturation in some ethereal realm of ideas. The counterpoint that he referenced in *Cuban Counterpoint* was that between tobacco and sugar, two crops that, because they are cultivated in markedly different ways, lead in turn to different forms of existence that serve to undergird different strata within Cuban society. Put simply, this takes culture back to its roots. The cultivation of tobacco is a highly skilled and time-consuming operation and so promotes different kinds of social interaction and thus of culture from those which arise in the context of the cultivation of sugar in plantations. Furthermore, Ortiz documents how the very meaning of tobacco undergoes transformation as it is introduced to different cultures. Tobacco primarily had a religious meaning for the indigenous population of the Americas. Subsequently it was readily adopted by the Black slaves but without possessing any religious meaning for them (Ortiz 1995: 197), before the Europeans, who were much more conflicted about its use, reconciled themselves to it on account of its economic value, especially for governments who saw taxes on tobacco as a source of revenue (230).

By focusing on the history of tobacco and sugar in terms of the different kinds of society they make possible within the same place, as well as the different meanings each has across time in the one place, Ortiz was able to bring culture back to the materiality that conditions social existence and from which it is sometimes abstracted. The history of cultures is at times impacted by policies that attempt to impose values on how those cultures change, but that history is not determined by those policies. Transculturation describes the process in its complexity and depth rather than setting up norms to guide the process.

If Ortiz departed from cosmopolitanism it was not because he was against the search for universal values, and if he departed from multiculturalism it was not because he was against the preservation of cultures. He offered transculturation, not as a policy, but as a novel description of an ongoing historical process whereby as distinct cultures come into contact with each other they change in ways that are determined by the reigning material conditions.

There is a very strong tendency today for societies and the various constituencies within them to identify with what they think of as culture. Cultures are contested: there are culture wars. But the very concept of culture itself is also contested with the result that multiple definitions of the term have been documented (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). For much of the 20th century and into our own times, how people have come to think about culture has been determined by the distinction between

nature and culture. The idea is that nature is a given, whereas cultures change. This understanding governs debates in many highly contested areas, but I will focus on how this distinction has come to govern the dominant ways of thinking about race. In that context, nature is what one inherits biologically, whereas culture is acquired. The distinction became fossilized in the distinction between physical anthropology and cultural anthropology. For the Boasian school of anthropology, among whom Herskovits can be numbered, race was assigned to physical anthropology; cultural anthropology had nothing to do with race (Herskovits 2005: xxi). That meant that when the physical anthropologists found the category of race too vague to be of any use to them, science had in effect abandoned the term *race* and they then through the UNESCO Statements on Race encouraged everybody else to do the same. But this strategy for combatting racism is predicated on a number of questionable assumptions. The first is the idea that race was always primarily a biological term; the second was that racism can be cured simply by education, as if racism did not have a more deeply rooted cause within the material economic system; and, third, that there is a hard and fast distinction between nature and culture. However, on this last point it must be said that although the distinction between nature and something that approximates to what has come to be identified as culture is widespread throughout the Western philosophical tradition, the distinction has been treated as absolute only recently. That is to say, it was long thought possible for there to be a transition between them. This is marked already by Aristotle's highly influential understanding of habits as a kind of second nature. One sees a similar fluidity between the two terms, for example, in the idea of the inheritance of acquired characteristics proposed by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck early in the 19th century. Indeed, one might have thought that as Darwin's evolutionary theory gained acceptance, the difference between nature and culture would have become even more troubled than it already was. But the opposite happened, and it did so in response to Northern Europe's obsession about race. The term *race* had gained a new currency and a new sense through the use that Immanuel Kant put it to in order to highlight what he regarded as divisions between four inheritable permanently different human kinds. From the perspective of the distinction between nature and culture, racism had largely been about an alleged correlation between physical characteristics and so-called moral characteristics, or what we might call cultural characteristics (Bernasconi 2023).

As I have indicated, what UNESCO and the school of anthropologists who owed their inspiration to Franz Boas attempted to do in the years after the Second World War was to sever the tie between nature and culture. Race as a biological category could not serve as a reliable indicator of moral or cultural characteristics. And discrimination against someone because of the hand nature had assigned to them was wrong because it was not something they had chosen. It seemed to leave open the idea that one can be held responsible for their belonging to a culture. But, as Frantz Fanon pointed out in 1956 in his essay 'Racism and Culture', this left intact what he called 'cultural racism' (Fanon 1967: 32). Fanon's argument was that the focus on understanding race as primarily a biological category and contesting it on the grounds that biology no longer had any use for the concept of race understood in this precise way was diverting attention from the real problem, which he argued had shifted from a biological hierarchy to a cultural hierarchy. Fanon thought of cultural racism as something relatively new, and in precisely the form in which it emerged it was new, but, of course, racism even

prior to the invention of a specifically biological idea of race, such as one finds in Kant, was always primarily directed not to physical but to what he would have identified as moral or cultural characteristics attributed to a certain group of people.

This is why I am insisting on the point that for Ortiz culture is rooted not in some alleged purity but, in the case of Cuba, in such social practices as the cultivation of tobacco and sugar and the forms of life they give rise to. Each of these crops had a different social function leading to the development of different institutions and different economies. Viewing culture from this perspective can help restore the tie between nature and culture. As Hannah Arendt reminded us in 'The Crisis in Culture', the word *culture* is Roman in origin and derives from the verb *colere*, meaning 'to cultivate, to dwell, take care, to tend and preserve' and thus it is primarily concerned with the intercourse between humans and nature in such a way as to make nature fit for human habitation (Arendt 1961: 211-212). She explained that it was not until Cicero that the word came to be used metaphorically to refer to the spirit and the mind (Cicero 1945: 159). Ortiz is by no means unique in investigating culture in terms that challenge the widespread tendency to highlight ideas rather than customs and institutions, instead serving to remind us that when we think about the relation of cultures to values, we should focus more on the values that a society embodies in its customs, laws, and institutions than those to which it pays lip service. Transculturation, as Ortiz develops it, asks us to look at the conditions that govern customs, laws, and institutions. A society is determined not only by its history, but also by the natural conditions related to its location, including climate and landscape, and by how it responds to them.

Attempts to think about cultural differences in a liberatory way have often employed terms that derive from biological inheritance. This threatens to reinscribe in them a reference to racial inheritance which then has to be renounced. One sees this in Édouard Glissant's embrace of the terms *métissage* and *creolization*, which contributed to the frequent misunderstanding of his use of these terms, even though he always insisted they were 'not primarily about the glorification of the composite nature of a people', because no people has been spared racial crossings, but about the denial of pure origins and thus ultimately about relations (Glissant 1989: 140).⁵ The phrase 'cultural hybridity' is subject to some of the same dangers. Ortiz was not immune from this tendency. While introducing the idea of transculturation he explained how 'the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals': the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them (Ortiz 1995: 103).⁶ At very least this oversimplifies the complexity at work that he was in other contexts intent on documenting. It is to counter that tendency and to present an account of the interaction between cultures better suited to contemporary conditions that I advocate understanding transculturation and its displacement of the idea of cultural purity not in terms of inheritance, with its implicit reference to racial purity, but in terms of porosity. I am not using the term *porosity* in its scientific sense, but more in the way that has come to be used by certain contemporary cultural theorists who are drawing on the usage of the term *porosity* by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis in their short 1925 essay simply titled 'Naples'. They

⁵Surprisingly little work has been done comparing Ortiz and Glissant. For a recent study, see Rieumont 2023.

⁶For some other examples from Ortiz's work, see Moore 2018: 18.

took the porosity of the stone from which much of Naples is built and extended it to describe improvisation in the way building and action interpenetrate each other in that city (Benjamin and Laci 1996: 416). The essay attracted a great deal of attention, beginning with a response by Ernst Bloch (1998), but it must be understood that they were writing more to elucidate how the Northern European experienced Naples than anything else. It was rather a remark by the cultural critic Iain Chambers that took its starting point from this debate from the 1920s that encouraged me to adopt the phrase 'porosity of cultures'. In an essay, again on Naples, Chambers observed that the idea of porosity could be extended to include its historical and cultural formation. He wrote: 'Porous matter absorbs whatever it encounters; it soaks up external elements while maintaining its initial form. It embodies and incorporates foreign elements and external pressures' (Chambers 2008: 81). This, it seems to me, is a better model for cultural exchange, for transculturation, than is biological inheritance that all too easily might fold back into cultural racism.

The tendency of every city, every region, every nation, every race to try to impress on itself a homogeneous self-understanding is not surprising, but it needs to be combined with an acknowledgment that the effort is doomed to failure. For transculturation, cultures are not static and do not have an essence. They are fundamentally dynamic, relational, and without fixed identity. Identities are historical products constantly changing, just as languages are, for example. Transculturation is a constant process without an end, cosmopolitan or otherwise.

It is the task of scholars to identify the various components of a culture, but for the inhabitants themselves it is sufficient simply to live amidst the rival narratives and experience the conflicts as something to be constantly renegotiated. Some cultures adopt influences from the outside as easily as a sponge absorbs water. It is like the way people seem to pick up the colloquialisms or gestures of the people they encounter without even being aware of it. Some other cultures are, to extend the metaphor, waterproof by comparison. But, because of the ubiquity of the global media, in today's world, exposure to other cultures is constant. The strategy the Japanese once practiced of trying to remain sheltered from those beyond their borders is no longer available in the modern world. The porosity of culture seemed exceptional to Northern European intellectuals like Benjamin and Bloch when they found it in Naples, although it has to be said that in thinking that they seem to have been blind to the porosity of their own culture. In any event, with the way that through technological innovation historical change seems to happen at an unprecedentedly fast pace, the porosity of all cultures seems more obvious today. It is the way cultures stay alive in an ever-changing world.

The porosity of cultures is not necessarily something positive. We must often look to the history of violence to understand what predominates in any place and at any time. Ortiz knew this as well as anyone. He did not present transculturation as a harmonious exercise. Referencing Las Casas's 'Destruction of the Indies', he recognized that in Cuba it gave rise to 'terrible clashes' (Ortiz 1995: 99). Nevertheless, the tensions and conflicts that arise through transculturation are also not necessarily negative in the way that one would have to think of them as being if one believed in the possibility of a pure culture. Cultures are like people. They are relational. They have no meaning in isolation. Indeed, I would want to go further. I would argue that if we are going to make space for this term *transculturation* it is to insist that cultures not only demonstrate complexities and variations within themselves, but they are also necessarily conflicted internally,

and that this should not always be understood as bad or destabilizing. The strife is primarily temporal. It concerns the perpetuation of certain of its features in constantly changing circumstances. But it is also localized because of the impact of climate and landscape. Transculturation, especially when understood in terms of the porosity of cultures, is not a policy. It describes a historical process that escapes any attempt to control it, even if the process itself is impacted by legal systems, material economic systems, and power differentials.⁷

Resistance to the idea of transculturation so understood will come from various sources and will impact many debates. That includes the constant controversy over cultural appropriation. This issue is too complex to address adequately here, but too serious to ignore altogether. There are contexts in which cries of cultural appropriation can seem overblown, as in debates about the ownership of different cuisines. However, in other contexts cultural appropriation amounts to cultural exploitation, as when a musical form is in effect stolen without any acknowledgment from those who have kept it alive and nurtured it. But the problem is not with the appropriation as such, so long as it is organic, recognized, and compensated for, because, if one can still speak in terms of culture, in spite of my reservations about doing so, one shares one's culture with others and one is owned by one's culture more than one owns it. Nevertheless, the problem described as one of cultural appropriation lies rather with the power differentials determining any such encounter and the long-standing problem of exoticization remains.

Let me close by returning to the three questions with which I began. Under the label *transculturation* I have endorsed a relational account of cultural deformation and reformation that derives in large part from the work of Ortiz insofar as it conceives cultural exchange across multiple diverse cultures as a dynamic, intermeshing historical process that must be approached not at the level of ideas or customs only, but also in terms of the economic, ecological, and material conditions governing any given society at any given time. And as the material conditions change, the values embodied by a culture have to be renegotiated. The term *transculturation* is to be preferred to the term *acculturation* because it does not suggest that cultural formation is a process of assimilation to a culture that is posited as privileged on account of the power that accrues to it. It is to be preferred to the term *multiculturalism* because it conceives of cultures as porous. Finally, transculturation and transculturality are receiving more attention now from philosophers, first, because what seemed to be a phenomenon found primarily in certain locations, such as Cuba, is now visible everywhere, not least owing to the new possibilities for people to travel extensively as well as the ways in which cultures travel through the media. Transculturation and transculturality are receiving more attention from philosophers now because, second, academic philosophy in the West is belatedly becoming less insular in the sense of being less dominated by a narrow conversation emanating from the older universities of Northern Europe and North America. It is likely that the long-awaited revitalization of philosophy will come from another orbit, one that is more open to the porosity that contemporary transculturation makes possible, because those outside the West already have the breadth of

⁷This is evident in the notion of transcultural statehood. See, for example, Parasher 2014.

knowledge and in many cases are equipped with the linguistic skills that are necessary to accomplish this.

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