Shifting Paradigms: From Transculturación to Hybridity: A Theoretical Critique

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Two theoretical problems are implied in the title of this paper. The first involves the removal of the concept of transculturación, first coined by Fernando Ortiz and later developed by Angel Rama, from the Latin American cultural critical apparatus and its replacement by other conceptual categories, such as hybridity or heterogeneity, purportedly more appropriate for the transnational moment. The second, suggests the possibility of an epistemological updating and pragmatic re-activation of transculturación under the current transnational framework.

There is no doubt that Angel Rama transformed Ortizian transculturación into a theoretical device capable of providing a sophisticated epistemological grounding for the many and diverse ideologies of mestizaje, as Cornejo Polar maintains in “Mestizaje, transculturación, heterogeneidad” (369). Rama’s transculturación, as heir to the Latin American autonomist position, simultaneously advances a theory of modernity as well as a strategy for cultural modernization in the periphery, within an implicit ideological framework of dependency theory and under the umbrella of a neo-Adornian critique of cultural imperialism and a wavering structural analysis. Even if, as Román de la Campa recently propounded, “a considerable popularization of the term is noticeable in recent years,” this popularization would correspond less to transculturación’s epistemological competence than to its ideological and affective resonances, which “evoke a vague but generalized sense of Latin American autochthony and authenticity” (13-4). In a word, transculturación’s popularity is based precisely on its caducity. Such a worn-out and nostalgic use is aided by the term’s rich allusiveness— which had fascinated Rama—and which constitutes an important anticipation of postmodern dissemination, as both de la Campa and Benítez Rojo

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observe. At the same time, this acritical usage masks the term’s aporias and, consequently, leaves it open for replacement by new theoretical categories. Does this epistemological devaluation of transculturation mean that modernity or its problematics have been overcome? To the contrary; but, obviously, the term’s devaluation does correspond to the obsolescence and erosion of the modernly utopian paradigms on which transculturation rested; an obsolescence brought about by the impact that globalization (and the weakening of nation-states), and postmodern discourses (and their disqualification of master narratives) effected on them. In other words, under the combined effect of changes wrought in socio-cultural reality, a new comprehension and interpretation of this new reality, and a necessarily distinct interpretation of transculturation, as the theory intended to explain that reality, Rama’s modernizing transculturation would have become an anachronism, enmeshed in the general failure of the “epistemological project of the 70s,” as Cornejo Polar would say (Escribir 14).

According to Neil Larsen, no doubt one of its most incisive critics, transculturation would amount to a surrogate hegemony, a strategy of containment of subaltern groups by a state power camouflaged beneath a populist aestheticism. That is to say, transculturation would become an ideological manifestation of peripheric modernity. Despite its questionable suitability as a modern hegemonic device, Rama’s transculturation becomes anachronistic at almost the very instance of its systematization. Particularly symptomatic is the fact that the term’s use develops timewise between the Southern Cone’s neofascist tide, which seemingly puts an end to the revolutionary optimism of the 60s, and its reprieve brought about by the Sandinista insurgency. Rama initially proposed transculturation in a series of articles published in the mid 70s; these were further developed in book form by 1982, but transculturation continues to be a theory of the 70s. In this sense, it dramatically registers postmodern mutations but as photographic negatives, in particular the fracture diversity/difference, as articulated by Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial stance:

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as “knowledgeable,” authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through