

The Americas between nation-identity and relation-identity: literary dialogues

Roland Walter

Resumo: este texto analisa a representação de identidade entre fissuras e fusões culturais em obras selecionadas de escritores panamericanos. Neste processo, o trabalho problematiza o conceito de 'transculturização' com o objetivo de explicar fluxos globais que determinam a consciência e o imaginário de pessoas vivendo no Caribe, Estados Unidos e Canadá. Argumenta também que tanto a identidade-nação quanto a identidade-relação alimentam formas e práticas culturais fractais entre e através de fronteiras permeáveis e postula o símbolo do mangue como uma das encruzilhadas transculturais novo-mundistas.

Abstract: this essay examines the representation of identity between cultural fissures and cultural fusions in select works by Pan-American writers. In the process, it problematizes the concept of 'transculturation' to explain global fluxes that determine the cultural consciousness and *imaginaire* of people living in the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada. It argues that both nation-identity and relation-identity nourish fractal cultural forms and practices in between and across permeable borders and posits the symbol of the mangrove as one of the New World transcultural crossroads.

... les mangroves qui laçent l'inextricable
(Édouard Glissant, 1997)

... partout la passion lente des mangroves ...
(Édouard Glissant, 2005)

Shifting material practices, increasing movements of people across regional, national, ethnic, and cultural borders and economic integration (MERCOSUL, NAFTA, FTA) are bringing about transformations in the consciousness and *imaginaire* of all peoples throughout the Americas. As a result, critical discourse has rediscovered the differential logic of contact and border zones, liminality, syncretism, in-betweenness, hybridity, *mestizaje*, *créolisation*, and *transculturación* to explain conjunctive and disjunctive global fluxes. In sum, the poetics of autonomous identity yields to the

poetics of relational identities. At the level of community, this means that nation-identity is supplemented by models of pluralistic, discontinuous communities. Thus, both nation-identity and relation-identity nourish fractal cultural forms in between and across permeable borders. This essay argues that it is through trans-culture that we can analyze fractally shaped cultural forms. In the process, it examines the representation of identity between cultural fissure and cultural fusion in select works by Pan-American writers.

Tracy Chapman, in her song "Across the Lines," captures interracial border crossings in the United States as a daring activity: "Across the lines / Who would dare to go / Under the bridge / Over the tracks / That separates whites from blacks / Choose sides / Or run for your life / Tonight the riots begin / On the back streets of America / They kill the dream of America". For Chapman, bridges and tracks rather than being routes of mediation are late twentieth-century manifestations of the color line. Since race operates as an impenetrable boundary dividing "whites from blacks", it is only possible to choose sides, to locate one's self within racially inflected spheres of demarcation. Situating one's self between these spheres, within the borderlands where whites and blacks would mix, is a potentially life-threatening undertaking. Yet so is the possibility of choosing sides since racial borders are systematically policed by battles for cultural power.

Whereas Chapman's lyrics express the impossibility of interracial and intercultural travel and exchange, it is a known fact that racial and cultural mixing has in fact been going on all along. For Frederick Jackson Turner, at the end of the 19th century, the ever-expanding frontier did not enclose space as in Europe but open it up. It was a "consolidating agent" to the nation-state, a space of freedom where "immigrants were Americanized, liberated and fused into a mixed race ..." (1956: 15, 23). In the 1980s Ralph Ellison (1995: 125) wrote that "by ignoring such matters as the sharing of bloodlines and cultural traditions by groups of widely differing ethnic origins, and by overlooking the blending and metamorphosis of cultural forms which is so characteristic of our society, we misconceive our

cultural identity". More recently, Gregory Rodriguez (2003: 2) has argued in an article with the telling title "Mongrel America", that "a new American cultural synthesis ... has begun to challenge the Anglo-American binary view of race." While I agree with him that the cross-cultural and ethnoracial makeup of the United States has always been based on "mixture" (although to a much lesser degree than in Latin America) and that this trend will increase in the future, I think that the keyword stitching together this hybrid process is arguably the term 'transculturation' rather than cultural *synthesis*.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1993: 47) states that "[a]ll Americans (from the vast continent America) were, are, or will be border-crossers. ... Border culture is a process of negotiation towards utopia The border is all we share/*La frontera es lo único que compartimos*". I want to argue that Gómez-Peña's thoughts on contemporary "borderization" (1987) – the meandering global flows that shape present-day intercultural relations – as well as his many performances are marked by the memory of a trauma figured in the experience, past and present, of migration: the traumatic dimension of not being at home, of arriving and having to leave again; of never arriving yet being propelled by material necessity (in the Marxian sense) and what Avtar Brah (1996: 180) calls a "homing desire." If, according to Gómez-Peña, "the border is all we share", and if, according to Chapman, the crossing of ethnoracial borders is like walking through a minefield, then the border, whether geographic, genderized, ethnicized, racialized, or psychic, is inseparably connected with this traumatic existential in-betweenness.

In order to give voice to this trauma, let me quote a passage from Tomás Rivera's novel ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra*/... *and the earth did not part*. Here a Mexican migrant worker, traveling from field to field in northern Minnesota, says the following about mobility:

cuando lleguemos, cuando lleguemos, ya, la mera verdad estoy cansado de llegar. Es la misma cosa llegar que partir porque apenas llegamos y ... la mera verdad estoy cansado de llegar. Mejor debería decir, cuando no lleguemos porque esa es la mera verdad. Nunca llegamos (RIVERA, 1980: 114).

Against recent celebrations of in-between spaces and fluid identities as discursive possibilities of resistance and desubalternization, and against neoliberal free market celebrations of migrant flexibility and mobility as the quintessence of liberty and individualism, I want to read this passage as a criticism of and protest against a contemporary form of exploitation in the United States, a nation whose self-deceptive belief in itself as a shining "city upon a hill" (John Winthrop) has prevented it from "mak[ing its] principles adequately manifest in either [its] conduct or in [its] social structure" (Ellison, 1995: 129). Rivera connotes the double chase that has characterized Manifest Destiny, the building of an empire by "fusing the boundedness of the home with the boundlessness of the nation" (Kaplan, 2002: 30): immigrants/migrants chasing an American Dream long betrayed and the American Dream chasing immigrants/migrants to nourish its insatiable material greed. In a more universal sense, this passage alludes to the destiny of a great majority of people(s) throughout the Americas. Kept running, they have been on the move in search of home and identity for centuries.

Globalization, whether defined as "the intensification of world-wide social relations, which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1990: 64), as disjunctive flows of people, capital, technology, images and ideologies (Appadurai, 1996), or as a conglomeration of forces and practices fighting against "growing corporate control over education, water, scientific research" (Klein, 2002: 126), that is, free trade policies of social dumping, introduces, without naming it, the idea of deterritorialization, dispersal and hybridity within a somewhat root-less, context-less global culture. This global worlding of economy and culture based on a liberal paradigm, however, has to be seen together with a local one based on a traditional (and in general more conservative) paradigm. This glocal worlding feeds upon the tension between cohesion and dispersal, fixed roots and rhizomic routes, homogenization and heterogenization: borders opening up into borderlands (postnational and postregional relation/inclusion)

and borders denying these borderlands (national/regional separation/exclusion). In cultural terms, then, it could be seen as a crossroads mediated by transculturation.

In their antiessentialist efforts to grasp and problematize the roots and routes of intercultural contact and the inherent consciousness of individual and collective identity both within and between specific places and ethnic groups in the Americas, critics from different academic fields have used such terms as anthropophagy, transculturation, *mestizaje*, mongrelization, amalgamation, assimilation, acculturation, creolization, hybridity, heterogeneity and migration, to name but a few. Stuart Hall (2000. 21-33; 22-23; 30-31), for instance, for whom "cultural identity" in general "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being,'" suggests that the construction of Caribbean identity is an act of traversing, of going through existing cultural territories, Africa and Europe, finally to arrive in the "Third, 'New World' presence" – "the juncture-point where the many cultural tributaries meet, ... where strangers from every other part of the globe collided." For Hall, the " 'New World' presence" is "itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference". It is a diasporic space/reality characterized by a complex ongoing *process* – "the mixes of colour, pigmentation, physiognomic type; ... 'blends' of tastes ... the aesthetics of the 'cross-overs,' of 'cut and mix'" – the cultural elements of which cannot be unified.

In a similar vein, Serge Gruzinski, in *La pensée métisse* (1999: 194-195; 81-82), emphasizes the inextricable nature of "les métissages" in the encounter of Mexican cultures, characterized by "juxtaposition ... masquage ... substitution." Gruzinski, like Hall, speaks of ongoing "movements de conjonction et de disjonction" that "paraissent étirer l'espace entre les motifs puis les replier les uns sur les autres avant de les disjoindre de nouveau." These movements, which do not end in fusion, are characterized by "une dynamique 'chaotique', au sens où tous les échanges qui s'y déroulent possèdent un caractère fragmenté, irrégulier et intermittent".

In *Narrative Identities*, I have described inter-American transcultural encounter as "an uneasy dialogue between

synthesis and symbiosis, continuity and rupture, coherence and fragmentation, utopia and dystopia, consensus and incommensurability, deconstruction and reconstruction. A dialogue, that is, between hegemonic and counterhegemonic forces and practices, between gestures, acts, and strategies of coercion, expropriation and (re)appropriation, which discriminates among diverse categories: imposed or willed assimilation, internalized self-contempt, and diverse forms of resistance such as mimicry and transwriting". I have argued that transculturation, seen as a dynamic model of relationality, is "a critical paradigm enabling us to trace the ways transmission occurs within and between different cultures, regions, and nations, particularly those in unequal relations of power rooted and routed in slavery, (neo)colonialism, migration, and/or diasporization. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, as such a negotiator of the disruptive in-between zone of inter- and intracultural disjunctures and conjunctures – the place where diverse histories, customs, values, beliefs, and cognitive systems are contested and interwoven without their different representations being dissolved into each other – transculturation accounts for the local and global production and interplay of difference and sameness" (Walter, 2003: 363). Global difference allocates local sameness as a strategic place for its practices while simultaneously local sameness appropriates global difference for its own purposes. Since it is through culture that we can measure the ethos and worldview of a group, community, tribe or nation and since most critics agree upon the fact that cultures are not fixed but fractal entities composed of diverse mixed fragments, I contend that the analytical focus on the border(land)s of cultural crossroads constitutes a useful approach to the comparative study of individual and collective identity throughout the Americas. That is to say, we can grasp the transcultural nature of cultural forms and practices through an examination of the diverse meandering movements in the interstitial zones – the disorderly aleatoric flux and unpredictable infolding of its elements. To elaborate

this reasoning and postulate the mangrove as one possible symbol of intersubjective and intercultural identity¹, let me focus on Maryse Condé's *Crossing the Mangrove*.

In Condé's novel *Crossing the Mangrove* (1995) Guadeloupean society is reconstructed during the wake for Francis Sancher, a foreigner, loved by some and reviled by others. As the villagers of Rivière au Sel come to pay their respects they reveal, either in dialogue with each other or in internal monologues, pieces of mystery behind both Sancher's life and death and their relationship with Sancher. At one point, Vilma alleges that it is impossible to cross or dominate the mangrove: "You don't cross a mangrove. You'd spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You'd be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud" (158). Yet mangroves are constituted by fluid borders separating and linking diverse elements such as water, roots, mud, crabs, reptiles, mollusks, fish, insects, birds, plants, flowers, and lichen, among other things. As an incorporative ecosystem, it is a space of transit composed of myriad places (and types) of exchange where temporary rootedness and uprootedness nourish each other. Here boundaries exist as permeable categories that contain and release: a process whereby the difference-as-separation between the inside and the outside is supplemented by relational diversity. The ebb and flow of the water within and across the rhizomic root system of the mangrove constitutes a transgressive, undomesticated space of constant metamorphosis, a liminal borderlands characterized by both inextricable slippage and interpenetration and intricate passageways and outlets, a waterscape-landscape interface that both resists and favors mobility. In this sense, the mangrove in Condé's novel, mentioned but once in Vilma's somewhat cryptic statement, becomes the key symbol of the characters' identity crises. Contrary to Vilma's statement, the characters' crossing the mangrove – their rhizomic relationships with the ostracized Other, Francis Sancher, which is reconstituted through memory,

¹ Thank Tânia Lima, poet and graduate student, for making me think about the representation of the mangrove in literature.

the slippery ground of remembrance and forgetting – becomes the stepping stone for new eventful phases in their stagnant lives. Let me further examine the meaning of the mangrove as a symbol of (inter)cultural identity by moving down south to Brazil.

In the 1990s, Recife became the stage of the Mangubeat Movement. Inspired by Josué de Castro's novel *Homens e Caranguejos* (1966), Chico Science and the band Nação Zumbi (among others) recreated Recife as *Manguetown* where *lama*, the mud of the mangrove, and *caranguejos* (crabs) merge with the city's destitute and marginalized people. Those who make a meager living as crab catchers become the mud that invades the mangrove metropolis. Yet it is a subaltern invasion of muddy crab-men whose antennae move psychedelically between the local and the global, past, present, and future, premodern thoughts and bearings and postmodern cybernetics. In response to postmodern mobility and transitoriness, the mangrove becomes the symbol of a chaotic transcultural urban labyrinth where extreme poverty and sumptuous luxury, different times and spaces, country bumpkins and cosmopolitan drifters, artists, migrants and civil servants meet and make their marks. The music of the Mangu Movement, Mangubeat, expresses this fast-moving glocal process: rap, funk, dub, reggae and hip hop are mixed with Northeastern *embolada*, *maracatu*, *coco* and *ciranda* rhythms. As messengers of transcultural mangrove encounters, Chico Science and the Nação Zumbi were able to capture the manifold intonations and implications of fluid experience in interstices marked by crossing fluxes so as to play, sing, decipher and live an endlessly proliferating significance of inter-American identity and culture. They instantiated the mangrove as a concrete utopian symbol and space of identity formation based on inclusive otherness through antagonistic complementarity² Thus I think we should see the mangrove space not only in terms of its inextricability, as does Edouard Glissant (1997: 240). In my view, the ebb and flow of the water nourishing a complex cycle of life and death,

² On the distinction between abstract and concrete utopia, see Ernst Bloch.

the fact that mangrove spaces throughout the Americas gave shelter to Amerindians and marooning Blacks, and the recent Mangubeat Movement, make for both the inextricable and the extricable nature of the mangrove space³ In this sense, I regard the mangrove as one of the New World transcultural crossroads: a place marker and eraser of meandering identifications.

Yet, how is it possible to cross the labyrinthine mangrove where the roots and routes of identification create the rhizomic terrain of identity formation? For Alice Walker (2004: 203, 211) the solution is to open our hearts toward what is "completely outside the circle of goodwill." In order to overcome the barriers of otherization that alienate us from others and ourselves, we should "[m]ake friends with" our "fear[s]." Making friends with our fears means, in the final analysis, to accept and respect the multiple identifications that constitute the open-ended process of identity formation, or, in the memorable words of Trinh Minh-ha (1991: 122), that "... there is no 'I' that just stands for *myself*. The 'I' is there; it has to be there, but it is there as the site where all other 'I's can enter and cut across one another" This, I argue, is also Condé's principal message in *Crossing the Mangrove*.

This openness to other people(s) and cultures and the inherent willingness to appreciate cultural elements of the 'other', I want to emphasize, should not be seen as the fashionable celebration of both hybrid cosmopolitanism — a shuttling between the local and the global that involves the capacity to live simultaneously in the here and the there⁴ — and hybridity-as-resistance in which racist 'impurity' is reinscribed as subversive multiplicity and as progressive agency; that is, the substitution of the vilified 'other' by euphorically valorizing the subaltern other who operates in interstitial spaces. Instead, we are dealing with "the myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities" (Brah, 1996: 208).

³ This also goes for Chamoiseau's *ville mangrove*, the liminal urban mangrove space in *Texaco*.

⁴ This would include what Imbert (2004: 38) calls cultural "caméléonage, la capacité à se fondre temporairement dans un milieu bigarré."

The tension holding these ambivalent processes together is the prominent theme in Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In search of an alternative third space – one that goes beyond Aztlán border(land)s while simultaneously being grounded in them⁵ – Anzaldúa's contradictory dance on the mestiza hyphen oscillates between cultural fusion as nation-identity and cultural fissure as relation-identity. On the one hand, Anzaldúa reaffirms the claims of Chicano nationalism implicit in the historical plot of the southward migration of Aztec tribes from their mythic homeland, Aztlán, located in what is now the American Southwest, to central Mexico, the founding of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec empire, the Spanish conquest and the birth of the mestizo people, the Treaty of Guadeloupe in 1848, and the northward move of mixed-blood peoples to the ancient homeland of their Aztec ancestors: "This land was Mexican once, / was Indian always / and is. / And will be again" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 3). On the other, she advocates a "new mestiza consciousness" based on mobility, migration, and transculturation: "[t]o survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads," a juggler of cultures who has "a plural personality" and "operates in a pluralistic mode" (1987: 195, 79). This ambivalent juxtaposition of nationalist claims to homeland and Native roots and relational claims to the trans-culture of ethnic crossroads should be seen as the simultaneous attempt at translating an imposed schizophrenic "nonhistory" into a sedimented collective memory and deconstructing this legacy of past exclusion by proposing a cultural model beyond dualisms, a poetics of cross-cultural relation and flow, foregrounding process over origins.

Thus it seems to me that the myriad forms of encounter implicit in the nation-identity/relation-identity pattern, what Glissant has alternately termed the sameness-diversity and rootedness-errantry interface, characterize diasporic and rooted communities, groups, and/or tribes throughout the Americas. The confluence of these forms, mediated by transculturation,

⁵ For a problematization of Aztlán as an "empty signifier," see Pérez-Torres.

should be seen as one of the common situations shared, albeit in different ways and degrees, by very different kinds of societies, allowing their similarities and differences to be measured against each other⁶ And why not use the mangrove as one of the symbols of transcultural identity crossroads of the Americas?

How would this symbol apply to Canada, a nation that is regarded as one of the more successful examples of tolerant multiculturalism – a mosaic characterized by “compromise, harmony, and equality?” (Adams, 2004:123) I believe that the term ‘mosaic’, which connotes fixity rather than mobility, is not a very advantageous one to describe a nation where land, water, and cultures meet in flux. I do think that the image of the mangrove would better connote the transcultural undercurrents of a multicultural cohabitation in flux and transitory fixity. In other words, and elaborating on Nancy Huston’s reasoning that “it’s easy to be ‘multicultural’ when you don’t have a culture of your own” (2002: 67), the mangrove might help us to imagine how intricately difficult it is to traverse the labyrinthine rhizomes of an existence among diverse cultures, to adopt different attitudes and behaviors in relation to different cultural epistemes. It might help us to discover and reveal the ‘trans’ lurking behind the ‘multi’ of cultural relationships; namely, that albeit in Canada ethnoracial and cultural relationships are indeed less violent than, for example, in the United States, they are far from harmonious. In order to be more explicit on this matter, let me briefly turn to the Haitian-Canadian writer Émile Ollivier.

In his novel *La Brûlerie* (2004), Ollivier continues to focus on the theme that suffuses his entire oeuvre, namely, exile, an existence among spaces, places, times and cultures. In contrast to *Passages*, where the plot is structured through the

⁶Here I disagree with Bouchard (2005: 53) who argues that “trans-culture ... connects with important dimensions of the cultural life in the Americas” but does not cover “the entire landscape”. I firmly believe that wherever cultures relate (and where do cultures not relate?) there are borderlands characterized by trans-culture. I regard the examination of these borderlands and their diasporic trans-cultures as an important approach to the study of the Americas. For other useful approaches, see Bouchard (2001).

characters' physical journeys, in *La Brûlerie* the reader accompanies the narrator's mental journeys. Sitting on the terrace of a café in Montreal's Côte-des-Neiges district, where he meets his fellow expatriates, he muses over the constant flow of passersby as a symbol of both an anonymous life in Montréal, "cette terre de passage", and the cultural in-betweenness of the Haitian diaspora, "ces personnages anonymes au coeur de l'anonymat, transparents et visibles au sein d'un monde invisible" (2004: 12). Thus, right from the beginning we are confronted not with a mosaic of multicultural cohabitation where relationality constitutes nation-identity but rather with the slippery transcultural void (which is not an empty place) of intercultural existence. "[D]es naufragés ... voués à l'errance," unable to "trouver l'osmose, la symbiose heureuse" between their past experience, the lived present and the desired future, they move from one displacement to the next within a "société qui a peur de tout ce qui est différent" (2004: 70-71, 123, 142). Ollivier's narrator comments the following on global worlding: "Quel beau paradoxe! Nous faisons volontiers l'éloge de la mondialisation, nous célébrons *ad nauseam* la levée des frontières, nous appelons de tous nos vœux l'espace ouvert, le mélange des cultures, l'air du grand large; cependant, nous sommes incommodés par ces gens du voyage, ces hommes sans feu ni lieu" (2004: 153).

How does Ollivier's delineation of Canadian society go together with what Imbert calls Canada's "capacity to *blend* cultural differences in daily social relationships" by means of which it "understands how to share its knowledge with others" (2005: 36; my emphasis)? Imbert has argued that what characterizes Canada as a society is its "capacity to thrive on unresolved contradictions ... to *connect* ... opposite tendencies, in an efficient tension which allows for an original way to foster cultural, social and economic expansion" (Imbert, 2005: 10, 7; my emphasis). Whereas in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*, Toronto is delineated as a racist and sexist postmodern nightmare, in Ollivier's *Passages* and *La Brûlerie* Montreal is at best an anonymous and at worst an unlivable place. Are we confronted here with trans-culture as transitory

moving through the (often violent) mangrove maze of multiple juxtaposed cultures; with cultural liminality as oscillation between different cultural epistemes, the liminal passage from trans-culture to multi-culture?

Trans-culture, the forever-in-the-making traverse of cultures, requires an in-between space that is both open and closed; a (mangrove?) setting-as-crossroads with porous boundaries, at once open to adjacent cultures by channels of transcultural flow and protected from assimilation. It has widely been argued that Canada has developed into such a cultural model of relation-identity. Yet, how does openness to otherness cohabit with what Ollivier delineates as fear of otherness and Brand as outright racism and sexism in such a model of “consensual disagreement?” And further, how do métis and Native writing (such as Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* and Jeanette Armstrong’s *Slash*, among others), constructing a nationalist grammar of identity based on the logic of resistance and oppositionality, fit in this conflicting relational identity? Or, what about Pitsémine in Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*, described by the narrator as “ni une Indienne ni une Blanche” but “quelque chose entre les deux ... elle n’était rien du tout”(1998: 246)? Like her mother, she is a social pariah. In this novel, imposed transculturation and *métissage* led to deracination, dispossession and deterritorialization preventing, as Paterson (2004: 119) has rightly observed, “l’union avec l’autre.” And is it not exactly this unity-in-difference with the other that the narrator in Ollivier’s *La Brûlerie* evokes but is unable to find and live in Canada: “Ne peut-on demeurer plusieurs ... accueillir en nous la diversité qui en vérité nous constitue?” (2004: 130) Here cultural differences are fissured into cultural separation rather than blended into cultural diversity. In other words, shouldn’t we rethink Imbert’s very useful phrase “consensual disagreement” by including other than a process of cultural blending (fusion) one of cultural fissures? In this case, do these fissures – racism, sexism and other forms of violence that prevent identity (re)construction – explode cultural consensus? And would that imply that Canada is both a transcultural mangrove space and a multicultural mosaic?

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