Josef Raab and Alexander Greiffenstern (Eds.)

Interculturalism in North America

Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Beyond

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Josef Raab and Alexander Greiffenstern
Spring 2013

Introduction: Interculturalism and Difference

ALEXANDER GREIFFENSTERN AND JOSEF RAAB

The danger is in the neatness
of identifications.
—Samuel Beckett, "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce."

What is interculturalism? There is no definitive answer to this question. However, we all have our own ideas about what *culture* is, some vague, some more concrete. In the end, we tend to conceive of culture as something that contains language, habits, conventions, tradition, mores, religion, accepted modes of interaction, certain views on gender, media, and all types of literary and artistic productions that engage with these features. With increased flows of migration and growing diasporic communities, we tend to loosen the connection between a certain culture and a corresponding location, nation, or "race." While we might still speak of French culture in the late 18th century (defined in part by place, time, nation, and "race"), we will also think of cultures like Internet-based blogospheres, which defy place, nation, and "race." Culture shapes the individual who lives (in) it; we tend to use the label of "identity" or "group identity" in this context. Or in other words: if an individual displays in terms of language, habits, beliefs, and practices the features of a certain culture, this individual is thought of as belonging to the group that distinguishes itself from other groups through these very characteristics.

But there is nothing static about cultural classifications or self-/identifications.[1] Moreover, cultures cannot be thought of as neatly separated by space, time, language or other characteristics or as nicely contained within certain limits. Often they share the same space and time, necessarily interacting with one another. Notions of multiculturalism, transculturalism and interculturalism have been advanced in an attempt to theorize and label the ways in which practices and ideas associated with one culture offset, radicalize or modify a different culture. Increasingly so in our network societies and in the age of global media, the Internet, and mass migrations, cultures are in constant contact with one another. Interculturalism is thus the norm rather than the exception.

[1] As Josef Raab and Martin Butler have pointed out, "political and collective subjects must not be regarded as given, but as the continually evolving results of discursive practices; their active contestations, responses, and proclamations offer them a chance for self-assertion in relation to discourses or master narratives that may have tended to exclude or marginalize them in the past" (3).

1. Interculturalism in North America

For North America, the coexistence of different cultures is a given—the American way of life. There never was only one Indian or Native American people. Many different tribes or nations populated the continent. These different cultures developed in accordance with their locations, they changed their locations, and through contact with other cultural practices their own habits, mores, beliefs, rituals, or stories were modified. It is not by accident that pre-Columbian Native American creation myths and trickster tales are filled with creatures from very different backgrounds and with very different abilities, traditions, and appearances. As Alfred Hornung reminds us, "long before Columbus's discovery and conquest of America, the new American continent seems to have been intercultural" (ix).

The Spanish *conquista* and contact with European imperialism changed the cultures of North America drastically. Since then, a peaceful and respectful coexistence of neighboring and intersecting cultures has been the exception. European nationalism and rivalries were mirrored in the politics of North America, and in more and more places the traces of earlier indigenous settlements were wiped out of the landscape and out of memory. The forced transplantation of Africans as slaves to the Caribbean and to the North American colonies of Spain, England, France, and other powers—later especially to the South of the U.S.A.—as well as various waves of migration to and within North America further diversified and intensified interculturalism in the Western Hemisphere. This interculturalism that is at the core of the American experience, unfortunately, has been dealt with all too reductively in nationally oriented studies of Canada, the U.S.A., and Mexico.[2]

Few are the subjects that have encouraged scholars of the Americas to look beyond national confines. One such notable exception is José Martí, who enjoys a prominent place in transnational academia—also as a figurehead of inter-American interculturalism. As George Lipsitz has observed,

> The José Martí conjured up in contemporary criticism is both an intellectual and an activist, an artist and an agitator, a nationalist and an internationalist. His writings from a century ago resonate powerfully with what we see around us today. … Although his early writings expressed anxiety over how ethnic heterogeneity held back Latin America, he eventually came to a position celebrating *mestizaje* as an advantage that would hasten rather than retard the building of nations in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Furthermore, he wrote, "there can be no racial animosity, because there

[2] Alfred Hornung has rightly complained that "academic research on the cultures of America operated from the national frames of European philologies. As such these national philologies were primarily concerned with a given European culture and conceived of its transatlantic colonies as extensions which could be subsumed under its European colonial roof. … The logical consequence of such a national partitioning of a historically intercultural continent was the disciplinary construction of monocultural spaces along the alleged monocultural frames of European nation states" (ix-x).

> are no races. … Whoever foments and spreads antagonism and hate between the races, sins against humanity." (294)

An un-raced interculturalism—and *mestizaje* as its productive outcome—, Martí believed, would be a strength rather than a weakness of what he called "our America."

Martí's vision did not materialize, however, because the development of America took a different path. Instead of embracing *mestizaje*, America saw the rivalries of young nations and the struggle for dominance by ethno-cultural groups within them. The political and economic rise of the United States was accompanied by a cultural hegemony—the basis of an uneven geopolitics from which the Americas are suffering to this day.

Furthermore, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, academic research (in fields like archeology, sociology, ethnography, anthropology, and history), social movements by Canadian First Nations, ethnic minorities in the U.S., Mexican *zapatistas* and many other groups, as well as a new understanding of "race" and ethnicity changed the perception of the other in North American cultures. What had previously only been vaguely recognized as not fitting the norm slowly became accepted as a viable culture or ethnic specificity. This process is not finished nor will it ever be, it is a becoming.

Helmbrecht Breinig and Klaus Lösch have observed that while a plurality of cultures has long characterized the U.S.A.—and the rest of the Americas, we might add—, it is not until the last third of the twentieth century that this cultural plurality has triggered a "multiculturalist movement":

> Although the percentage of the American population that did not speak any or hardly any English was several times higher in the 1890s (the last major phase of immigration before the late twentieth century) than in the 1990s, and although back then ethnic and foreign-language newspapers, theaters, community and religious rituals were much more common than they are now, this fact did not lead to a multiculturalist debate as it does today. (14)

The Civil Rights Movement, the American Indian Movement, the Chicano Movement and other forms of social and ethnic protest since the 1950s as well as changing conceptions of ethno-race[3] have done much to unsettle Anglo hegemony in the United States.

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[3] George Lipsitz has illustrated the tenuous nature of racial categorizations; this murkiness applies not only to people of African descent in the Dominican Republic, Lipsitz's example, but to racial designations in the Americas as a whole. Lipsitz explains: "People of African descent in the Dominican Republic learn to speak of themselves as *indio* rather than *negro*, and newspapers refer to light- and dark-skinned blacks as *indios claros* or *indios oscuros*. Even as migration from the West Indies and Haiti has combined with intermarriage to gradually 'blacken' the Dominican population, its official culture has become all that much more defensive and emphatic about its 'whiteness,' although Dominicans considered *blanco* in their native country have often found themselves viewed as black elsewhere" (301).

With the advent in North America of the metropolis, fast transportation, and rising streams of migration, modern life presents new problems and opportunities for the coexistence of cultures. As George Lipsitz pointed out back in 1998, intercultural contacts in the Americas have increased sharply over the past half decade:

> Los Angeles is the second-largest Mexican city, the second-largest Salvadoran city, and the second-largest Guatemalan city in the world. New York has a Caribbean population larger than the combined populations of Kingston (Jamaica), San Juan (Puerto Rico), and Port of Spain (Trinidad). … More than one-third of all Puerto Ricans live in North American cities, and the Puerto Rican population in the continental United States has doubled since the 1950s. (295)

We might add references to the large Asian populations of cities like Vancouver and Toronto, the masses of Cuban and Venezuelan expatriates in Miami, or the demographics of Mexico City, where about 70 percent of the city's family heads are originally from rural areas and about 19 percent of the population are indigenous.

2. Cultural Tensions—(Becoming) Purely Hybrid

Despite the proclamation of a postethnic age and despite changing views on "race," examples of conflictive interculturalism abound in contemporary North America. In Chiapas, Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) has been waging what has come to be called a "war against the Mexican state" since 1994 in its attempt to gain indigenous control over local resources, especially land. In the United States, there has been a sharp rise in Islamophobia and in hate crimes against Arab Americans since 9/11. Moustafa Bayoumi's collection, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America* (2009), takes up W.E.B. Du Bois's question from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which had discussed African Americans as an alleged problem of white America. Bayoumi and the Arabs and Arab Americans whose stories he tells illustrate the many forms of intercultural suspicion and hatred that 9/11 has triggered. Canada, in early 2013, saw protests by First Nations that had erupted over plans by the government of Stephen Harper to make unilateral changes to the Indian Act of 1876. In this context, a member of the Cree nation will probably foreground his/her tribal association, although he/she may well also participate in, say, the culture of Alberta or Quebec, the culture of Canada, or the culture of environmentalists in other contexts.

The modern individual lives surrounded by different cultures but might not necessarily identify with any of them completely. Also, the frequency of intercultural encounters does not automatically signify a desire for intercultural understanding.[4] A multicultural society respects all difference and in theory none has to be the dominant

[4] As Donald W. Klopf writes, "With the reality of increasing intercultural contact of a physical sort, the mental distance that can divide cultural groups can become aggravated. Real or imagined controversies can multiply, necessitating a concerted effort to understand people whose backgrounds and beliefs vastly differ" (4).

culture. But conservative voices have called for an end to multiculturalism (especially in the U.S.A.) and a return to the one, true culture that allegedly belongs to the location or nation in question. Samuel P. Huntington's infamous book, *Who Are We?—The Challenges to America's National Identity*, is among the better-known works that have called for the primacy of Euro-Americans and expressed suspicion concerning the allegiance of hyphenated Americans.

A homogeneous (white) national culture may be a conservative wish, but as George Lipsitz has remarked, in an age of migration and massive intercultural contact, national cultures (if we want to use that term at all) will not remain static (or 'pure'). This applies to all nations in North America, regardless of whether they tend to be the origin, the transition point, or the destination of migration. "Commodity culture, migrant labor, exile, and return paradoxically reinforce *and* subvert traditional understandings of the nation," Lipsitz writes—and of a national culture, we might add (299). Cultures—whether determined by nation, location, time, ethnicity or other factors—are dynamic: they interact and this interaction affects and modifies them. As Renato Rosaldo has observed, "Instead of hybridity versus purity, … it is hybridity all the way down" (xv).[5] Cultural hybridity, however, does not mean fusion. As Harald Zapf makes clear: "*mixture* should not be understood as homogenizing fusion but rather as a connection of different parts" (302). In the processes that constitute this "connection of different parts," difference continues to be upheld—at least partially.

Néstor García Canclini is to be applauded for the inter-American reception that his study, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, has enjoyed. He masterfully examines cultural hybridity in the Latin American context, speaking of a "multitemporal heterogeneity" and of "intercultural hybridization," which occur because, according to García Canclini, in Latin America traditions continue while modernity has not yet completely arrived (3, 207). He diagnoses three processes that promote cultural hybridization in Latin America: "(1) the breakup and mixing of the collections that used to organize cultural systems, (2) the deterritorialization of symbolic processes, and (3) the expansion of impure genres" (207). There is much flux here, as different cultural practices come into contact with each other and new models emerge.

Hybrid, according to Elisabeth Bronfen and Benjamin Marius, may be defined as "everything that owes its existence to a mixture of traditions or chains of signification, everything that links different kinds of discourse and technologies, everything that came into being through techniques of *collage*, *sampling*, or *bricolage*" (14, our translation). Consequently, the concept of *hybridity* questions ideas of purity and homogeneity and thus opposes essentialist notions of culture or identity. Such essentialist notions, however, are still behind the thinking of a scholar like Albert-Reiner Glaap, who asserts that "intercultural encounters which aim at a recognition of each other can

[5] Homi K. Bhabha also maintains that cultures need to be seen as "part of a complex process of 'minoritarian' modernity, not simply a polarity of majority and minority, the center and the periphery" (xx).

be of three different kinds": "cohabitation," "integration," and "assimilation" (457-48). Such a view unduly prioritizes the dominant culture and deems it impervious to change. Yet history shows that culture is always changing and inevitably its location moves, in space and in time. A return is inevitably different. We need to not only respect other cultures but to value difference as such.

3. A New Old Concept of Difference

In 2002 Helmbrecht Breinig and Klaus Lösch coined the term "transdifference" in order to cope with the alleged theoretical maze that has been created in the humanities in recent decades. Positing the need to move beyond binary logic, they devised a term that was to function as an umbrella for several other concepts like "hybridity," "transcultural," or/and "intercultural": "transdifference," they write, "also implies a shift of emphasis away from notions of a mélange in the direction of a simultaneity of—often conflicting—positions, loyalties, affiliations and participations" (21). As such, transdifference "has to be seen as complementary to, and therefore not simply 'beyond' difference" (23). Summing up, Breinig and Lösch observe:

> Transdifference, as we define it, denotes all that which resists the construction of meaning based on an exclusionary and conclusional binary model. While there can be no transdifference without difference—transdifference does not mean indifference—, the term refers to whatever runs "through" the line of demarcation drawn by binary difference. It does not do away with the originary binary inscription of difference, but rather causes it to oscillate. Thus, the concept of transdifference interrogates the validity of binary constructions of difference without completely deconstructing them. This means that difference is simultaneously bracketed and yet retained as a point of reference. The term transdifference refers to such areas of language, thought, and experience that are excluded by the either/or while retaining difference both in its logical and experiential aspects. (23)

Breinig and Lösch recognize the importance of difference as a concept and relate their term *transdifference* to the work of the French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. For both, Derrida and Deleuze, difference is of particular interest. Derrida spoke of *différance*, creating a special, intentionally ambivalent concept, while Deleuze focuses on rescuing *différence* from its subordination to other concepts, mainly *identity*.

Let us now return to the definition of "interculturalism." "Inter" signifies "in-between;" thus, interculturalism refers to the location between two or more cultures and the practice of negotiating between a number of cultural models. At the heart of this process lies difference. Two (or more) cultures can have much in common, they can share a language, they can have comparable habits and mores that they deduce from a religious belief system and a legal framework, and they can exist side by side in the same place and time. It seems that the subtler the differences are, the stronger the perceived need to stress one's distinction.