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THOMAS STAUDER

Transculturación in Alejo Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces*

Up to now, the novel *El siglo de las luces* has most often been interpreted from a political perspective in the context of the Cuban revolution – which seems justified by the fact that Carpentier started writing it when Fidel Castro was already engaged in a guerrilla war against the dictator Batista. However, the novel also contains an important description of the birth of a Cuban identity on the verge of the 19th century. In this essay I want to show that this identity is a transcultural one and that Carpentier conceived it in terms that owe much to the ideas of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz.

Fernando Ortiz's Concept of *Transculturación* as Defined in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940)

Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969) had already gained a lot of intellectual and professional experience as a university teacher and in the diplomatic service, and had travelled extensively in Europe when in 1924 he developed an interest in the folklore of the Afro-Cuban population, i.e. in the customs and beliefs of the descendants of Africans who had been deported by force from Africa to the Caribbean as slaves since the first half of the 16th century. But he was not willing to analyze these phenomena in the terms of North-American anthropology; in 1930, referring not only to the economy and to politics, but also to scientific discourse, he lashed out at the pernicious influence which, as he held, the United States exercised on the Cuban nation.

Consequently, when he published his *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* in 1940, he chose to substitute the notion of acculturation of North-American sociology by his own concept of *transculturación*. By creating this new term, he rejected the idea that a socially imposed culture from outside, as in the case of colonization, takes complete possession of and finally eradicates the already existing culture of the colonized population. Ortiz probably exaggerated in [end of page 123]

ascribing this meaning to the term acculturation since its definition by Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton and Melville J. Herskovits is not as narrow as supposed by him (cf. Santí 85).

Ortiz could base his views on earlier research by Bronislaw Malinowski, who in 1938 had published the essay “The Anthropology of Changing African Cultures,” in which he had attacked the stereotype that cultural contact had to necessarily consist in the victory of one culture over another. As the Polish-born anthropologist, who was teaching at Yale, repeated in 1940 in his preface to the *Contrapunteo*, cultural influence in no instance had to be only unidirectional: “Es un proceso en el cual ambas partes de la ecuación resultan modificadas. Un proceso en el cual emerge una nueva realidad, compuesta y compleja” (Malinowski 125). When formulating his definition of *transculturación*, Ortiz on the one hand emphasized like Malinowski that it implied the fusion of different cultures, which leads to a completely new culture, but on the other hand he also made clear that he meant this term to designate a process rather than a result:

Entendemos que el vocablo *transculturación* expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transitivo de una cultura a otra, porque éste no consiste solamente en adquirir una distinta cultura, que es lo que en rigor indica la voz angloamericana *acculturation*, sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial desculturación, y, además, significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse de neoculturación. [...] En todo abrazo de culturas sucede lo que en la cópula genética de los individuos: la criatura siempre tiene algo de ambos progenitores, pero también siempre es distinta de cada uno de los dos. En conjunto, el proceso es una *transculturación*, y este vocablo comprende todas las fases de su parábola. (260)

In the *Contrapunteo*, the useful plants tobacco and sugar emblematically represent the endogenous and exogenous elements of Cuban culture; according to Ortiz, the growing, treatment, and sale of these plants over centuries determined not only the economy but also the civilization of the island:

El tabaco es un don mágico del salvajismo; el azúcar es un don científico de la civilización. El tabaco fue de América llevado; el azúcar fue a la América traído. El tabaco es planta indígena que los europeos llegados con Colón descubrieron, precisamente en Cuba, a comienzos de noviembre del año 1492; la caña de azúcar es planta aquí extranjera y lejana que del Oriente fue llevada a Europa [end of page 124]

y a las Canarias y de allí trajo Colón a las Antillas, en 1493. En Cuba el tabaco fue hallado con sorpresa; pero el azúcar fue introducido con propósito planeado. (193)

Out of this seemingly simple dichotomy, Ortiz deducts a complicated tissue of contrasting characteristics of tobacco and sugar; he affirms that the interplay of these two opposing forces has conditioned the mindset of the Cubans and that this type of historic development should be called *transculturación*. The sugar plant, imported to Cuba from outside, is grown with ‘imperialistic’ methods: in vast *latifundios*, which betray their oppressive structure by their own terminology since in Cuba the fields which are used for the cultivation of sugarcane are called *colonias*, and the sugar refineries *centrales* (Ortiz 202-205). In contrast to this, the tobacco plant according to Ortiz presents a centrifugal, autonomous tendency and is cultivated in *vegas*, which are small and financially independent farms; in order to demonstrate the role of tobacco in Cuban society, Ortiz puts forward the great number of tobacco planters who participated during the 19th century in the independence wars against the Spaniards. He continues to mention further connotations of sugar and tobacco, which however are too numerous to discuss in detail here.

In the second chapter of his book, Ortiz shows that Cuba, once the native Taínos had been extirpated shortly after the arrival of Columbus, was colonized by Europeans and Africans who themselves had been abruptly severed from their original cultural background and thus were eager to acquire a new identity. He comes to the conclusion that Cuba is the Latin-American nation most affected by the phenomenon of *transculturación*.

Finally, I still would like to mention that in addition to this academic term Ortiz also used a popular image for the same cultural process; in an essay published in 1940, and thus in the same year as the *Contrapunteo*, he spoke of *ajiaco*, i.e. ‘stew’ or ‘hot-pot’. His way of introducing this metaphor proves once again that he wants to keep his distance from North-American terminology and tries to emancipate himself from the cultural hegemony of the United States:

Se dice con frecuencia que América, toda la América, es un crisol, un *melting pot*. Acaso sea buena esta metáfora para la América que tiene fundaciones metalúrgicas, donde el símil puede ser comprendido hasta por el vulgo. Pero los americanos del Caribe podemos emplear una semblanza más apropiada: Para nosotros América, toda América es un *ajiaco*. (qtd. in Pérez Firmat 27-28) [*end of page 125*]

The Reception of the Concept of *Transculturación* in the Humanities

Fernando Ortiz's notion of *transculturación* was first only discussed by anthropologists and was far from meeting with unanimous approval (Santí 92). As for literary historians and critics, their interest in the concept started only after a long delay when in the last quarter of the 20th century the flourishing of postcolonial studies created a demand for innovative theories about Latin-American culture. However, many of the critics who employed the term *transculturación* did not bother about its original meaning, but simply used it as a synonym for *mestizaje*.

Ángel Rama, who in 1982 published the monograph *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, was certainly sufficiently acquainted with the ideas of Fernando Ortiz. Nevertheless, he redefined the term *transculturación* as the resistance of the indigenous cultures against cultural influences from outside. The difference to Ortiz' use of the concept can be explained by the fact that Rama did not concentrate on Cuba but analyzed literary works from a number of Latin-American countries with a completely different cultural history. Only in Cuba we find the particular situation of a population that since the early 16th century has consisted only of immigrants and their descendants, without any vestiges of the autochthonous inhabitants. These different newcomers, who obviously did not all have the same social status, especially if one considers the slaves, shared the need to acclimatize in the Caribbean, and this fostered their fusion into a common and completely new civilization. Ortiz calls this “la boda del tabaco con el azúcar” and speaks of “casorio y felicidad” (250) whereas for Rama *transculturación* does not imply harmony, but rather resistance against cultural oppression:

Revela resistencia a considerar la cultura propia, tradicional, que recibe el impacto externo que habrá de modificarla, como una entidad meramente pasiva o incluso inferior, destinada a las mayores pérdidas, sin ninguna clase de respuesta creadora. [...] Se trata de una fuerza que actúa con desenvoltura tanto sobre su herencia particular, según las situaciones propias de su desarrollo, como sobre las aportaciones provenientes de fuera. (33-34)

Recently, Ortiz's terminology has been discussed in detail by Alfonso de Toro. In an essay published in 2006, he affirms that “desde un punto de vista histórico” (25) the pioneer work of the Cuban anthropologist keeps its validity, especially “el empleo del término de ‘transculturación’ como un elemento global y central para caracterizar el proceso histórico, [end of page 126]

cultural, étnico y económico de la formación de Cuba, que puede aplicarse en menor o mayor grado a toda Latinoamérica” (25). Nevertheless, de Toro disapproves of what he calls the “aproximación de Ortiz” (25): the idea of complete fusion, which is contained in the Cuban scholar’s image of the “cópula genética” that leads to a child with characteristics from both parents, but identical with none of them.

De Toro rejects the idea of “cultura como algo homogéneo” (25) when applied to Latin America; for that reason he prefers to use instead of *transculturación* the contemporary notion of *hibridez*, which according to him has the advantage of preserving the distinction between heterogeneous elements within a cultural whole:

La estrategia de hibridación apunta a la *potencialización de la diferencia* y no a su reducción, asimilación, adaptación, en un primer momento. En un segundo momento, la estrategia de hibridación conduce a un *reconocimiento de la diferencia*, esto es, a la posibilidad de negociar identidades diferentes en un tercer espacio. (16)

Application of the Concept of *Transculturación* to Alejo Carpentier’s Novel *El siglo de las luces* (1962)

The Cuban author Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980) can be considered the consequence of *transculturación* on a biographical level since he was born in Lausanne as the child of a French father and a Russian mother, who shortly after his birth emigrated with him to Havana. After having been imprisoned in 1927 as an opponent of the Machado dictatorship, he left Cuba for France in 1928, where he met and collaborated with the most important French writers, artists, and musicians of that period. In 1934, he travelled to Madrid where he met with some of the most renowned intellectuals of that time; in 1937, he was in Spain again where he participated in the “II Congreso por la Defensa de la Cultura”; only in 1939, after more than ten years in Europe, he returned to Havana. This extraordinary biography – not to mention all his later journeys nor his stays abroad, for example in Venezuela from 1946 to 1958 – explains to a large extent his great sensibility for all types of cultural contact, especially between Europe and Latin America. But he felt at home in the Caribbean and was proud to have visited personally almost all the islands of this region: “[M]uy pocos escritores en el continente conocen las Antillas de una manera tan absoluta como yo. Puedo decir que me faltan apenas tres o cuatro islas de las Antillas por visitar, y que las conozco en [end of page 127]

su diversidad.” (Chao 120) With *El siglo de las luces*, set in the period between 1790 and 1809 in Cuba, Guadeloupe, and other parts of the Caribbean, and with extensive sojourns of certain characters in Europe, Carpentier wanted to create “una novela que abarcara, a la vez, todo el ámbito del Caribe” (*El siglo de las luces* 411), demonstrating that the inhabitants of these countries have more in common than their geographic proximity.

Cuba as Part of the Caribbean

During his stay in Guadeloupe, Esteban¹ notes that the weather and the plants there are similar to those in Cuba (*El siglo de las luces* 187) while both differ from what he had observed during a journey to France (*El siglo de las luces* 190); in this way he starts to perceive the Caribbean region as a whole: “el mundo de las Antillas fascinaba al joven, [...] dentro de la unidad de un clima y de una vegetación comunes” (*El siglo de las luces* 223). The Southern frontier of this home region, the French colony Guyana, situated on the coast of the Latin-American mainland, seems already strange and exotic to Esteban (*El siglo de las luces* 249) while the neighbouring Surinam offers to him some familiar sights which immediately make him feel at home: “Habían reaparecido, para Esteban, las girándulas y arañas, los espejos de aguas profundas, los parabrisas y cristales de su infancia” (*El siglo de las luces* 278). The description of Sofía’s sea-trip to Cayenne also contributes to the delimitation of the Caribbean region: whereas the architecture of the Venezuelan port-town Guaira reminds her of Cuba – “casas de rejas de madera y romanillas que le recordaban las de Santiago de Cuba” (*El siglo de las luces* 355) –, the island Barbados, though geographically part of the Antilles, seems to her influenced by another culture, with buildings and vegetation untypical of the Caribbean:

Se vio Sofía en Bridgetown, descubriendo un mundo distinto del que hasta ahora hubiese conocido en el Caribe. [...] Durante horas rodaron por los caminos de una Antilla domada, cuyas tierras deslindadas por suaves [end of page 128]

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¹ Esteban is the cousin of Carlos and Sofía, the children of a wealthy merchant from Havana; together with the historical figure of Víctor Hugues, a Frenchman initially living at Port-au-Prince and later sent back to the Caribbean by Robespierre, these three invented characters from colonial Cuba are the protagonists of Carpentier’s novel.

ondulaciones – aquí nada era grande, nada aplastante, nada amenazador – eran cultivadas hasta las mismas orillas del mar. Aquí la caña de azúcar parecía trigo verde, las yerbas tenían mansedumbre y urbanidad de césped, las mismas palmeras dejaban de parecer árboles tropicales. (*El siglo de las luces* 356-357)

Throughout Carpentier's novel it is emphasised that towards the end of the 18th century the inhabitants of the Caribbean live with a kind of time-lag with respect to the historical developments in Europe; they receive journals from abroad "con meses de retraso" (*El siglo de las luces* 34) and even when they are informed about certain events – for example, the French Revolution, of central importance in this novel –, they are not able to judge their importance adequately: "No tenían noción de la trascendencia mundial de los acontecimientos que se estaban desarrollando en Europa" (*El siglo de las luces* 81).

Transculturación in the Caribbean

The first character of *El siglo de las luces* who clearly carries elements from two different cultures that both influence his attitude and behavior is the mulatto Ogé from Port-au-Prince. In the French colony Saint-Domingue that would become independent only in 1804 and then be called Haiti, he has learned the magic incantations based on the voodoo rites of the black population, but he has also studied medicine in Paris, returning to the Caribbean with the medical knowledge of a European doctor. Ogé is called to the bedside of Esteban in Havana after all the efforts to cure this young Cuban's disease with conventional means have failed. In this emergency, Ogé's transcultural background proves to be extremely useful since he is able to leave aside his scientific training and remember the Afro-Caribbean teachings from his native island. He discovers a courtyard adjacent to Esteban's room where several wild plants grow around a pagan altar; according to the voodoo religion, such plants can influence the health of a human being negatively:

'Es probable que hayamos dado con la razón del mal', dijo, entregándose a una explicación que Sofía halló semejante, en todo, a un curso de nigromancia. Según él, ciertas enfermedades estaban misteriosamente relacionadas con el crecimiento de una yerba, planta o árbol en un lugar cercano. Cada ser humano tenía un 'doble' en alguna criatura vegetal. Y había casos en que ese 'doble', para su propio desarrollo, robaba energías al hombre [*end of page* 129]

que a él vivía ligado, condenándole a la enfermedad cuando florecía o daba semillas. (*El siglo de las luces* 51)

Esteban's educated relatives, whose view of life is shaped by the European Enlightenment, mistrust all forms of Afro-Caribbean superstition, but in the end they have to recognize that Oge's spells work since Esteban can be healed: "Mucho de mago, de charlatán, había en sus teatrales gesticulaciones. Pero con ello se había logrado un milagro" (*El siglo de las luces* 53).

In the framework of his theory of the "real maravilloso", Alejo Carpentier defines a wonder as "una inesperada alteración de la realidad" ("De lo real maravilloso americano" 118), which is the case in this episode of the novel. According to the Cuban author, faith in supernatural events, which cannot be explained with the help of occidental reason, is wide-spread not only in the Caribbean, but also in other Latin-American countries because of their *transculturación*. Carpentier does not use explicitly the term coined by Fernando Ortiz, but describes the constitution of Latin-American civilizations in a way which reminds one of the anthropologist's concept: "por la presencia fáustica del indio y del negro, [...] por los fecundos mestizajes que propició" ("De lo real maravilloso americano" 121).

Esteban's cousin Sofía seems likewise very distant from Afro-Caribbean magic at the beginning of the novel. The ancestors of her father had come to Havana from the Spanish region of Extremadura (*El siglo de las luces* 23), and she was brought up as the daughter of a wealthy *criollo* and educated in conformity with European – especially French – values. This becomes evident when we observe her dreaming of a voyage to Paris; *la ville lumière* is emblematically represented by Jean-Antoine Houdon's statue of Voltaire (*El siglo de las luces* 27). But even this seemingly rational young woman carries in her the Cubans' receptiveness for irrational beliefs: during a journey across the Caribbean Sea she is fascinated by the marvels of nature, and when crew members tell her about fabulous creatures which are supposed to live there, e.g. "un extraño pez al que llamaban Unicornio de Mar," she does not doubt of their existence: "todo se hacía creíble en esta navegación" (*El siglo de las luces* 92).

This type of blind faith beyond reason has been analyzed by Alejo Carpentier; in his theory, it is the basic requirement for the perception of the marvelous: "la sensación de lo maravilloso presupone una fe" ("De lo real maravilloso americano" 118). However, in this sphere there are great differences between Latin America and Europe: "Lo real [*end of page 130*]

maravilloso [...] que yo defiendo, y es lo real maravilloso nuestro, es el que encontramos al estado bruto, latente, omnipresente en todo lo latinoamericano. Aquí lo insólito es cotidiano, siempre fu cotidiano” (“Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso” 148). Sofía’s receptiveness to the daily wonders of her own region shows that her mindset has not been formed only by European standards, but also by the tradition of the Caribbean; as the result of the blending of two cultural heritages, she can be considered an example of *transculturación* as described by Fernando Ortiz.

Quite similarly, Esteban first tries to live only rationally, as a follower of the empirical sciences from Europe; he buys for his home in Havana a “Gabinete de Física”, filled with instruments for hundreds of experiments:

Eran telescopios, balanzas hidrostáticas, trozos de ámbar, brújulas, imanes, tornillos de Arquímedes, modelos de cabrias, tubos comunicantes, botellas de Leyden, péndulos y balancines, machinas en miniatura, a los que el fabricante había añadido, para suplir la carencia de ciertos objetos, un estuche matemático con lo más adelantado en la materia. (*El siglo de las luces* 29)

Esteban becomes fascinated with the revolutionary ideals of the French freemason Víctor Hugues – who years ago had left Europe for the Caribbean colony Saint-Domingue – when the latter appears in Havana in 1791. Enflamed by the idea of fighting for ‘*liberté, égalité, fraternité*’ – paraphrased in Carpentier’s novel as “*libertad, felicidad,² igualdad, dignidad humana*” (*El siglo de las luces* 81) –, Esteban readily follows Hugues to France; during their sea journey, he imagines the distant country as the centre of all human progress. This hope acquires an almost religious dimension by several citations from the Bible (especially those referring to the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, mentioned in the Second Book of Moses): “Se estaba asistiendo, allá, al nacimiento de una nueva humanidad. [...] Hacia el Oriente se erguía, enhiesta y magnífica, vislumbrada por los ojos del entendimiento, la Columna de Fuego que guía las marchas hacia toda Tierra Prometida” (*El siglo de las luces* 104). [end of page 131]

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² This term reminds one of the “pursuit of happiness” mentioned in the Declaration of Independence of the United States; however, no explicit reference to Northern America can be found in Carpentier’s novel and the characters receive the revolutionary spirit exclusively from France.

But after having encountered the numerous difficulties and contradictions of the revolutionary regime in France, made worse by internal power struggles which later on will lead to the execution of Robespierre who is admired by both Hugues and Esteban, the young Cuban returns to the Caribbean completely disillusioned. From the perspective of postcolonial studies, it is particularly important to note that at this stage for him France is no longer a shining example; the former hierarchy between centre and periphery of civilization has been destroyed: “Vengo de vivir entre los barbaros” (*El siglo de las luces* 290), says Esteban to Sofía once he is back in Havana.

Esteban’s transcultural mindset comes to light in his irrational, emotive reaction to the Caribbean flora and fauna, apparently at odds with his enthusiasm for the European Enlightenment and more appropriate for a native inhabitant of Latin America, in whose life and religion nature plays a dominant role. During a visit to Guadeloupe, Esteban experiences an epiphany while climbing a tree: “Una exaltación inexplicable, rara, profunda, alegraba a Esteban. [...] Quien se abraza a los altos pechos de un tronco, realiza una suerte de acto nupcial” (*El siglo de las luces* 188) Here one might think of Carpentier’s definition of the Latin-American “real maravilloso” as “una revelación de la realidad, [...] una iluminación inhabitual o singularmente favorecedora de las inadvertidas riquezas de la realidad” (“De lo real maravilloso americano” 118). In a later part of the novel, Esteban makes a similar experience – which shows his closeness to and empathy towards nature – while crossing the Caribbean Sea with the fleet of Víctor Hugues:

La claridad, la transparencia, el frescor del agua, en las primeras horas de la mañana, producían a Esteban una exaltación física muy semejante a una lúcida embriaguez. [...] Se sentía tan feliz, tan envuelto, tan saturado de luz [...], con tal expresión de deleite en el rostro que parecía un místico bienaventurado favorecido por alguna Inefable Visión [...] – maravillándose de cuanto descubría al pie de las rocas. (*El siglo de las luces* 203)

We can again compare this passage from *El siglo de las luces* – not only here, but also elsewhere in the novel the author employs different derivations of the term ‘marvelous’ – with a phrase from Carpentier’s influential essay of 1948 in which he writes of “una ampliación de las escalas y categorías de la realidad, percibidas con particular intensidad en virtud de una exaltación del espíritu que lo conduce a un modo de ‘estado límite’” (“De lo real maravilloso americano” 118).

And why is the Caribbean nature to such an extent admirable? What distinguishes it from the European nature? In Carpentier’s opinion, flora and [end of page 132]

fauna of his home region possess a symbiotic structure – in which heterogeneous elements do not only coexist, so that one might talk of hybridity, but are definitively blended – comparable to the transculturally formed identity of its inhabitants:

Llevado al universo de las simbiosis, [...] Esteban se maravillaba al observar cómo el lenguaje, en estas islas, había tenido que usar de la aglutinación, la amalgama verbal y la metáfora, para traducir la ambigüedad formal de cosas que participaban de varias esencias. Del mismo modo que ciertos árboles eran llamados ‘acacia-pulseras’, ‘ananás-porcelana’, ‘madera-costilla’, ‘escoba-las-diez’, ‘primo-trébol’, ‘piñón-botija’, ‘tisana-nube’, ‘palo-iguana’, muchas criaturas marinas recibían nombres que, por fijar una imagen, establecían una fantástica zoología de peces-perros, peces-bueyes, peces-tigres. (*El siglo de las luces* 206-207)

Within Carpentier’s theory of culture, there is a second important term in addition to the marvelous: the ‘baroque’, likewise related to Fernando Ortiz’s concept of *transculturación*. As for other Latin-American writers,³ according to Carpentier ‘baroque’ does not designate a limited historical period, but a timeless artistic attitude, which has become the expression of the subcontinent’s *mestizaje cultural*. “[E]l barroco” signifies for Carpentier “un arte en movimiento, un arte de pulsión, un arte que va de un centro hacia afuera y va rompiendo, en cierto modo, sus propios márgenes” (“Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso” 130). This centrifugal, rhizomatic structure can be interpreted within postcoloniality as a revolt against the externally imposed, hierarchical order of the colonizers, and this rebellion results in a transcultural creation, to which one might apply the concept of the ‘third space’ coined by Homi K. Bhabha.⁴ [end of page 133]

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³ One could mention for example the Cuban author José Lezama Lima, who in an essay with the title “La curiosidad barroca” established a connection between the baroque attitude and the development of a Latin American identity: “[P]odemos decir que entre nosotros el barroco fue un arte de la contraconquista. [...] El primer americano que va surgiendo dominador de sus caudales es nuestro señor barroco. [...] Ese americano señor barroco, auténtico primer instalado en lo nuestro [...]” (Lezama Lima qtd. in Berg 218).

⁴ “The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation [...] makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process [...]. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force [...]” (Bhabha 37)

El academismo es característico de las épocas asentadas, llenas de sí mismas, seguras de sí mismas. El barroco, en cambio, se manifiesta donde hay transformación, mutación, innovación. [...] ¿Y por qué es América Latina la tierra de elección del barroco? Porque toda simbiosis, todo mestizaje, engendra un barroquismo. El barroquismo americano se acrece con la criolledad, con el sentido del criollo, con la conciencia que cobra el hombre americano, sea hijo de blanco venido de Europa, sea hijo de negro africano, sea hijo de indio nacido en el continente [...] de ser otra cosa, de ser una cosa nueva, de ser una simbiosis, de ser un criollo; y el espíritu criollo de por sí es un espíritu barroco. (“Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso” 138; 142)

In *El siglo de las luces*, the *criollo* Esteban discovers baroque patterns in the Caribbean nature: “las formas zoológicas, los primeros barroquismos de la Creación” (*El siglo de las luces* 204-205). He remains particularly fascinated by a mussel shell, through the complex description of which the novel’s author alludes to the culture of his home region:

El caracol era el Mediador entre lo evanescente, lo escurrido, la fluidez sin ley ni medida y la tierra de las cristalizaciones, esctructuras y alternancias, donde todo era asible y ponderable. De la Mar sometida a ciclos lunares, tornadiza, abierto o furiosa, ovillada o destejida, por siempre ajena al módulo, el teorema y la ecuación, surgían esos sorprendentes carapachos [...]. Fijación de desarrollos lineales, volutas legisladas, arquitecturas cónicas de una maravillosa precisión, equilibrios de volúmenes, arabescos tangibles que intuían todos los barroquismos por venir. (*El siglo de las luces* 209-210)

For Carpentier, the transcultural blending of populations and ethnic groups in the Caribbean was the continuation and intensification of a similar process in Europe’s antiquity around the Mediterranean; in the same way as when Ortiz talks about *neoculturación*, Carpentier emphasizes the innovative impetus of this fusion, which in his opinion is positive for society. At the end of the following passage from his novel, in mentioning a symbolic encounter between the European olive tree and the Latin American maize plant, he clearly imitates the central image from Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*:

[...] la turbulenta y soberbia civilización mediterranea – ahora prolongada en este Mediterráneo Caribe, donde proseguíase la Confusión de Rasgos iniciada, hacía muchos milenios, en el ámbito de los Pueblos del Mar. Aquí venían a encontrarse, al cabo de larga dispersión, mezclando acentos y cabelleras, entregados a renovadores mestizajes, los vástagos de las Tribus Extraviadas, [...] para arribar a estas orillas propiciadoras del transcendental encuentro de la Oliva con el Maíz. (*El siglo de las luces* 213) [end of page 134]

Further Forms of Cultural Contact in Carpentier's Novel

In conclusion, I still would like to analyze some other types of encounter and mutual influence between different cultures in *El siglo de las luces*; given the fact that these cultures are not blended into each other, but remain distinct and separate, these phenomena transcend the definition of *transculturación* according to Fernando Ortiz, though they are of course related to it.

In this novel, the contact of cultures takes place above all in the sphere of politics; the author asks the question whether and to what extent political ideals and reforms can be transferred from one cultural region to another. The historical example chosen by Alejo Carpentier is the French Revolution, which in the beginning implies for the Caribbean protagonists of *El siglo de las luces* the hope for a better future. The symbolism of light inherent in the denomination of an epoch determined by a new philosophy – the Enlightenment – and in the novel's title, appears several times: we are told that Sofía felt like “en el umbral de una época de transformaciones” and that “la luz daba una nueva personalidad a las cosas” (*El siglo de las luces* 55); later on, she evokes “el auxilio de la Razón y de las Luces” (*El siglo de las luces* 91).

The three young Cubans Esteban, Sofía and Carlos learn more about the latest political developments in France from Víctor Hugues – born in Marseille, but at that moment living in Port-au-Prince –, who makes his appearance on a *Sábado de Gloria*, the Good Friday of the year 1791. His association with this religious feast underlines his role as a Christ-like savior who symbolizes the resurrection, here to be understood in a merely worldly sense, with reference to the revolution. That the latter can also have undesirable side-effects becomes evident when Hugues' shop in Saint-Domingue is destroyed by the black and mulatto people of the island who respond with riots to the declaration of human rights in Paris. Bereft of all material means of living in the Caribbean, Hugues decides to return to his native country; he takes with him Esteban, who is thrilled by the upheaval in Europe.

After a three years' stay in France, during which the two visitors recognize already that social reality does not always correspond to the lofty aims of the revolution, in 1794 Hugues is sent with a mission from Robespierre to Guadeloupe. Once again, Esteban does not hesitate to accompany him since this journey seems to serve a noble purpose: Hugues carries with him on the ship not only the guillotine, but also a decree concerning the abolition of slavery in the French colonies. This
[end of page 135]

new expedition to the Caribbean on behalf of the revolution is explicitly compared with Columbus' discovery of the 'New World'. However, Hugues criticizes the alleged Christian ethos of the Genovese admiral and pretends that only he, the humanitarian atheist, brings true liberty:

'Por vez primera una escuadra avanza hacia América sin llevar cruces en alto. La flota de Colón las llevaba pintadas en las velas. Eran el signo de una Esclavitud que se imponería a los hombres del Nuevo Mundo, en nombre de un Redentor que había muerto. [...] Nosotros (y volviéndose bruscamente designó el decreto), nosotros los sin-cruces, los sin-redentores, los sin-Dios, vamos allá, en barcos sin capellanes, para abolir los privilegios y establecer la igualdad. [...]'

(*El siglo de las luces* 145)

After his military victory over the English at Pointe-à-Pitre, Hugues is named governor of Guadeloupe (*El siglo de las luces* 160); his increasing vanity comes to light when he is eagerly awaiting the journals from Paris in order to read there the praise of his heroic deeds (*El siglo de las luces* 167). He is proud of his "papel en el gran quehacer de la época" (*El siglo de las luces* 169), but shuts his eyes to the fact that the revolutionary doctrine from France is unsuitable for the societies of the Caribbean – "un Catecismo Revolucionario que ya no correspondía a la realidad" (*El siglo de las luces* 191) –, contenting himself with an attitude of coarse pragmatism: "Una revolución no se argumenta: se hace" (*El siglo de las luces* 170). His attempt to transplant the French revolutionary regime to Guadeloupe without respecting the local customs and sensibilities – an arrogance akin to that of the former colonizers, in spite of his ostensibly enlightened ideology – leads to bloody excesses in the form of mass executions: during a single day, not less than 865 inhabitants of the island are led to the guillotine (*El siglo de las luces* 172). Nor can Hugues overcome his racist prejudices against the black people of Guadeloupe who are compelled by him to forced labor despite the official abolition of slavery (*El siglo de las luces* 177).

When after Robespierre's death Hugues must fear to lose his post in the Caribbean, he stubbornly decides to continue propagating revolutionary ideals in the region, if necessary on his own. Convinced that he has no choice but to emancipate himself from the French government, he persuades Esteban to translate the French treatises he has carried with him into Spanish, in order to create a revolutionary movement in Latin America: "Podía surgir aún algo justo [...]. [...] '[...] Y si la Revolución ha de perderse en Francia seguirá en América. [...] Es necesario que de esta isla salgan las ideas que habrán de agitar a la América Española.'" (*El siglo de las luces* 181-182). Nevertheless, in [end of page 136]

his daily political activities Hugues becomes more and more cynical; in 1798, he defends the ruthlessness and brutality of certain of his actions as socially necessary: “No sé lo que pensarás de mí. Acaso, que soy un monstruo. Pero hay épocas, recuérdalo, que no se hacen para los hombres tiernos” (*El siglo de las luces* 241). He finally admits to have lost his faith in political progress: “La revolución se desmorona. No tengo ya de qué agarrarme. No creo en nada” (*El siglo de las luces* 241-242).

Given that at this point the two male protagonists of the novel seem no longer able nor willing to fight for a better society – their attempt to export the French Revolution to another hemisphere having undeniably failed –, a female character comes to the fore: Sofía, whose Greek name indicates wisdom and who distinguishes herself by her common sense and her practical intelligence. Like Esteban, she had felt attracted by Víctor Hugues and admired his progressive ideas; nevertheless, she had always asked for the concrete improvements brought by the revolution, preserving her critical spirit: “Poco llevada hacia las especulaciones trascendentales, Sofía hacía regresar a los demás a la tierra, interesándose concretamente por la condición de la mujer y la educación de los niños en la sociedad nueva” (*El siglo de las luces* 83). Since an unmarried woman was not allowed to travel at will at that epoch, she cannot accompany Hugues to France or to Guadeloupe like Esteban and is therefore during a large part of the novel unable to engage herself in political action. We only learn that she would have liked to do so upon Esteban’s return to Cuba: when her cousin tells her that the French Revolution has foundered and that in the future he will no longer participate in such endeavors – “para agarrarme cuando estalle, tendrán que buscarme con linternas a mediodía” (*El siglo de las luces* 305) –, she rejects his historical pessimism:

No podía vivirse sin un ideal político; la dicha de los pueblos no podía alcanzarse de primer intento; se habían cometido graves errores, ciertamente, pero esos errores servirían de útil enseñanza para el futuro; ella comprendía que Esteban había pasado por ciertas experiencias dolorosas – y mucho lo compadecía por ello –, pero acaso fuese víctima de un idealismo exagerado; ella admitía que los excesos de la Revolución eran deplorables, pero las grandes conquistas humanas sólo se lograban con dolor y sacrificio. (*El siglo de las luces* 306)

When Sofía expresses the desire to install the guillotine also in Havana as soon as possible (*El siglo de las luces* 307), the novel’s author does not only allude to the Cuban independence wars against the Spaniards [end of page 137]

during the 19th century, but also to Fidel Castro's more recent communist revolution.⁵ During a discussion with Esteban, who shows his disappointment with Hugues' immoral behavior, Sofía tells him that the individual weaknesses of a single person do not invalidate the revolutionary ideals: "Fue un mal engendro de una gran revolución" (*El siglo de las luces* 312).

At the end of the novel, Sofía after all has the opportunity to play an active role in a major political event. This final type of culture contact is of particular significance since Sofía carries back the revolutionary impulse to Europe, from where she had received it: despite the fact that she is a Cuban, she fights with the Spanish population against the French occupation army in May 1808, the famous *dos de mayo*, immortalized by Francisco de Goya.⁶

A reason for travelling to Spain presents itself when Esteban is deported to Ceuta after having protested against the Spanish colonial government in Cuba; Sofía follows him in order to help him. Before embarking, she addresses to Víctor Hugues these words of farewell: "Quiero volver al mundo de los vivos; de los que creen en algo. Nada espero de quienes nada esperan" (*El siglo de las luces* 392).

When some months later her brother Carlos searches for Sofía's traces in Madrid, he is told that after having managed to liberate Esteban from prison, Sofía had for some time lived with her cousin in the Spanish capital like brother and sister (*El siglo de las luces* 402-405). At the moment of the insurrection against the French, it is Sofía who accepts the political responsibility which falls to her in this situation and who carries along the skeptical Esteban:

Fue ése el momento en que Sofía se desprendió de la ventana: '¡Vamos allá!', gritó, arrancando sables y puñales de la panoplia. Esteban trató de detenerla: 'No seas idiota: están ametrallando. No vas a hacer nada con esos hierros viejos.' '¡Quédate si quieres! ¡Yo voy!' '¿Y vas a pelear por quien?' '¡Por los que se echaron a la calle! – gritó Sofía –. ¡Hay que hacer algo!' '¿Qué?' '¡Algo!' (*El siglo de las luces* 407) [end of page 138]

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⁵ Though he had started writing this novel in 1956 and more or less completed it in 1958, Carpentier did effectuate some "retoques" (Chao 118) after Castro's victory in January 1959; that is the reason why *El siglo de las luces* was published only in 1962.

⁶ Goya's oil painting in which he portrays a battle scene from the uprising in Madrid on May 2nd 1808 dates from 1814 and simply bears the title *El dos de mayo de 1808* (though it is also known as *La carga de los mamelucos*).

After this dramatic incident, nothing precise is known about the fate of the two Cubans; Carlos – and with him the novel’s reader – has to suppose that they have lost their lives for the noble cause of Spanish liberty. The motto from the *Zohar* which Carpentier had placed at the beginning of the novel – “Las palabras no caen en el vacío” (*El siglo de las luces* 9) – acquires its full significance only now: political ideas always have a certain effect on society, though this may take some time.⁷

Seen from a postcolonial perspective, the fact that two characters from a Caribbean island that at the moment of these events has been under Spanish dominion for more than three centuries find the courage to act in the heart of the country that is supposed to be their master, shows the beginning of a reversal of the balance of power. Having assumed their transcultural identity as Cubans, Sofía and Esteban no longer respect the former hierarchy between colonizing and colonized nations, but choose to act in a ‘third space’ of postcolonial freedom.

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⁷ By hiding in *El siglo de las luces* some anachronisms – for example a citation from the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (*El siglo de las luces* 82-83), or an allusion to the imperialism of the United States (*El siglo de las luces* 231) –, Carpentier gives to understand that this political optimism refers also to the moment of the novel’s publication in 1962. In 1959, he had returned to Cuba after a several years’ exile in Venezuela; until his death in 1980, he collaborated with the revolutionary regime in several official functions (Reichardt 429). We may therefore assume that like his heroine Sofía, Carpentier was convinced of the necessity of personal commitment – despite the failings of some revolutionary leaders.

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