

Part II

Theory

A. Definitions

Chapter 4

**Transculture in the Context of
Contemporary Critical Theories**

Mikhail Epstein

The following notes intend only to delineate the territory of transculture on the map of contemporary theories, not to present it in color and detail.

Deconstruction and Multiculturalism

The project of transculture as applied to the Western postmodern condition grows from the latter's internal tensions and contradictions. There are two principal aspects of postmodern theory that are increasingly found to be in fundamental disagreement: deconstruction and multiculturalism.

The focus of deconstruction is the critique of essentialism, the refutation of the metaphysics of presence and origin. As we can read in Jacques Derrida and his followers, neither writing nor any system of signs, including culture as a whole, has any historical or physical origin that can be fixed in a certain moment of time or in the presence of some material body. Signs have relationship only with one another, and even the difference between signs and nonsigns constitutes still another level of the sign system and its internal division and multiplication. There are no origins, only traces left by these presupposed origins, only copies of the "original," and there is no end to the progression or regression of signs to the openness of the future or the past. "The trace is not only the disappear-

ance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin."¹ From this perspective cultures do not reproduce or represent any natural condition, but rather constitute their own origin, beyond any initial physical parameters. If these parameters, like blackness or whiteness, maleness or femaleness, are invoked in the progression of culture, it is not because of their original essence, but because a certain author constructs his/her cultural personality in this way. Deconstruction, followed to its logical end, opens in its every object the capacity to endlessly reconstruct and redefine itself. The "origin" is never present as a determination of cultural identity; on the contrary, from the very beginning it is constructed culturally.

The axiomatics of deconstructionist theory come into contradiction with the axiomatics of another theory that is equally considered to be a foundation of the postmodernist paradigm: that of multiculturalism. Among various currents within multiculturalism, I refer mostly to those promoting essential and even essentialist connections between cultural production and ethnic and physical origin, including the institutionalized multiculturalism of the mainstream curriculum in American academia. Even the so-called strategic essentialism advocated by thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak, though accepting essentialism only as a temporary remedy, still clearly exemplifies this "other side" of the postmodern paradigm, in its sharp contradiction with the Deleuzian and Derridean theories of cultural "deterritorialization" and "the lack of origin."

Given these qualifications, multiculturalism proceeds from the assumption that each cultural formation can and should be explained in relation to its racial, sexual, or ethnic origin that gives rise to the particular system of social signification. As Toni Morrison, a Nobel prize-winner in literature, puts it, "Of course I'm a black writer. . . . I'm not just a black writer, but categories like black writer, woman writer and Latin American writer aren't marginal anymore. We have to acknowledge that the thing we call 'literature' is more pluralistic now, just as society ought to be. The melting pot never worked. We ought to be able to accept on equal terms everybody from the Hasidim to Walter Lippmann, from the Rastafarians to Ralph Bunche."² From this point of view there is no such abstract thing as a masterpiece of world literature but only a variety of specific canons, each reflecting the cultural dispositions of a given racial or sexual subject. Therefore the very definitions of multiple cultures necessarily include references to their point of physical origin as

is true in "white male" culture, or "black female" culture, or "homosexual" culture.

If deconstruction and multiculturalism are two complementary aspects of the postmodernist paradigm, should we remain unaware of this basic contradiction that agonizes the entire postmodernist project? The stress on ethnic and sexual origins disables and undermines the deconstructionist approach, and vice versa: The more consistently we denounce any talk of physical presence or historic origin behind the cultural system of signs, the more futile is the multiculturalist insistence on the deduction of cultural heritage from the peculiarities of a given race and sex.

Jacques Derrida recently touched on this contradiction by setting up deconstruction against those multicultural theories that stress an external difference between self-enclosed cultural identities instead of looking into the internal difference that infuses and dynamizes all forms of identity.

We often insist nowadays on cultural identity, for instance, national identity, linguistic identity, and so on. Sometimes the struggles under the banner of cultural identity, national identity, linguistic identity, are noble fights. But at the same time the people who fight for their identity must pay attention to the fact that identity is not the self-identity of a thing, this glass, for instance, this microphone, but implies difference within identity. That is, the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself, language is different from itself; the person is different from itself. Once you take into account this inner and other [outer?] difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on.³

The tension between deconstruction and multiculturalism is further accentuated by those thinkers who recognize the validity of deconstruction but still find essentialism to be a useful strategy to pursue the rights of minorities and the politics of identity. According to bell hooks, ". . . we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics. . . . The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from this experience."⁴

These two views—the multiculturalist, stressing "collective identities," and the deconstructionist, stressing "internal differences"—become increasingly incompatible within one theoretical paradigm. What

is needed now is further thinking about the possible resolution or at least conscious elaboration of this contradiction. Is there any theoretical possibility of combining the theory of cultural origins with the theory of deconstruction and dis-origination as the specific model of cultural creativity?

I would like to consider the work of Merab Mamardashvili (1930–1990) as a different voice from an ethnic minority. Mamardashvili was a major Russian philosopher of Georgian origin, who spent his last years in his native Tbilisi, where he suffered through the excesses of Georgian cultural and political nationalism exacerbated by the downfall of the Soviet empire. Mamardashvili sympathizes with multiculturalism as a mode of liberation from a monolithic cultural canon, but objects to the glorification of ethnic diversity for its own sake. Parroting a typical argument: "Each culture is valuable in itself. People should be allowed to live within their cultures,"—Mamardashvili objects that, "The defense of autonomous customs sometimes proves to be a denial of the right to freedom and to another world. It seems as if a decision were made for them: you live in such an original way, that it is quite cultural to live as you do, so go on and live this way. But did anyone ask me personally? . . . Perhaps I am suffocating within the fully autonomous customs of my complex and developed culture?"

Thus, what needs to be preserved, in Mamardashvili's view, is the right to live beyond one's culture, on the borders of cultures, to take a step transcending one's own surrounding, native culture and milieu not for the sake of anything else. Not for the sake of any other culture, but for the sake of nothing. Transcendence into nothing. Generally speaking, such an act is truly the living, pulsating center of the entire human universe. This is a primordial metaphysical act." Mamardashvili understands metaphysics to be the movement beyond any physical determination and liberation from any social and cultural identity: "This understandable and noble aspiration to defend those who are oppressed by some kind of culture-centrism, for example Eurocentrism or any other—this aspiration forgets and makes us forget that there exists a metaphysics of freedom and thought that is not peculiar to us alone. This is a kind of reverse racism."⁶ This type of racism can be described as a variety of reductionism, which includes not only the reduction of a diversity of cultures to one privileged canon, but also the reduction of a diversity of personalities to their "origins," their "genetic" culture. To transcend the limits of one's native culture does not constitute betrayal, because the limits of any culture are too narrow for the full range of human potentials. From this

standpoint, transculture does not mean adding yet another culture to the existing array; it is rather a special mode of existence spanning cultural boundaries, a transcendence into "no culture," which indicates how, ultimately, the human being exceeds all "genetic" definitions.

Thus, to reduce culture to its racial or sexual origin means to ignore what makes culture different from nature. We can rephrase T. S. Eliot's famous passage in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Culture is not a turning loose of nature, but an escape from nature."⁷ Culture in general can be described as the process of denaturalization and de-origination, which bears a connection with its origin only through the series of its erasures and subversions. This does not mean that the origin does not exist at all, that, as Derrida put it, "the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin."⁸ Such a radical denial would eliminate the dramatic tension that connects culture with its natural origins in the dialectics of departure and return, erasure and recognition. To expose physical origins as only retroactively "constructed" and entirely determined by subsequent cultural "self-images" would be a mere inversion of the derivation of culture from physical origins, i.e. a reverse form of determinism, now imposed from the present onto the past.

We cannot simply deny the role of inborn conditions, or genes in cultural formations. No escape or "derritorialization" would be possible without the initial territory occupied by ethnic origins, gender, etc. Origins need to be clearly stated in order to be vigorously transcended. The location of the prison certainly predetermines the route of flight from the prison, and such "determinism" is a prerequisite for liberation. Natural origins are overstepped in cultural evolution and simultaneously reinscribed into its sign systems, as "whiteness" or "blackness," "masculinity" or "femininity" of cultural practices and rituals. We have to recognize the truth of multiculturalism in order to proceed with the task of deconstruction. Though an escape from nature, culture is still too natural, too essentialist, too deterministic; it carries further the racial, ethnic, and sexual limitations imposed by nature and therefore calls for new efforts of liberation.

Therefore we need to re-historicize the project of deconstruction, inscribing it within the future perspectives of cultures rather than denying their natural origins in the past. Cultures do have origins and are indeed sustained and determined by these origins. Only by accepting these origins can we posit the goal of dis-origination, the flight from origins as an emerging historical possibility. Instead of a theoretical denial of origins,

we envision their historical overcoming. Deconstruction of the past should not diminish our historical labor in constructing the future.

It is in this space of internal tension between constructing the future. construction, between origins and disorientation, where the transcultural movement evolves. Transculture presumes the enduring "physicality" and "essentiality" of existing cultures and the possibility of their further transcendence, in particular through interference with other cultures. To be cultural means to rise above one's inborn identity, such as "white, adult male," through the variety of self-deconstructions, self-transformations, and interferences with other identities, such as woman, black, child, disabled. For this purpose books, films, and all sign systems are created: to dissolve the solidity of one's nature, one's identity and to share the experience of "the other."

Identity may be formed both on biological and symbolic levels, for example, as "natural sex" and as "cultural sexism," which correspond to the two possible movements of their subversion, cultural and transcultural. This can be illustrated by one passage from Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time" (1979). In her challenge to the concept of "gender identity" that had been cherished by the previous generations of feminists, Kristeva finds it necessary to "bring out—along with the *singularity* of each person and, even more, along with the multiplicity of every person's possible identifications . . . —the *relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence*" Gender identity makes way for a multiplicity of personalities, each with its own potential for further multiple identifications. The crucial role in this "relativization" of both biological and symbolic identities belongs, according to Kristeva, to "aesthetic practices" designed to "demystify" the ideological uniformity of gender and therefore to provide the symbolic "retreat from sexism (male as well as female)." Here we need to accentuate a distinction between the two levels of "relativization" implicit in Kristeva's passage. Biological existence is relativized in symbolic practices of replacement and mediation that allow humans to transcend their original identities. But the same practices subsequently reestablish some "symbolic bond" or "community of language" among the representatives of the same biological identity, which corresponds to the strategies of "old feminism" as criticized by Kristeva. These symbolic identities should be "relativized" in their own turn, and Kristeva emphasizes this transcultural aspect of aesthetic practices by her call "to demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore, the *community of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes.*"¹⁰

Culture relativizes natural identities, whereas transculture demystifies cultural identities. This process has no limit. From a transcultural perspective, multiculturalism is right in asserting the natural origins and physical essences of existing cultures, whereas deconstruction is equally right in demystifying these origins and essences. It is not merely a contradiction within the postmodern paradigm but the very engine of its further transformation. Origins need to be acknowledged in order to be exceeded in the transnatural movement of culture that at a certain stage passes into transcultural movement.

Thus transculture arises from the internal paradox of postmodernity, not as a denial of this paradox but as an attempt at its conscious resolution.

Counterculture and Transculture

The countercultural model, which theoretically was elaborated by Herbert Marcuse and other New Left thinkers, underscored the role of marginalized strata and minorities in the transformation of the society. Racial and national minorities, students and intellectuals, lumpenized/declassed elements of the proletariat, and presumably even criminals had to unite against the capitalist system and to initiate social revolution.

The subsequent development of Western critical theory has tamed this revolutionary zeal of Marcusean reasoning but reaffirmed the appeal to minorities. Instead of instigating these minorities to radical actions against the entire system, as in the 1960s, critical theorists of the 1980s, such as Cornel West, bell hooks, and Homi Bhabha, propose the construction of a multicultural or "minoritized" society in which no group could claim the status of the ruling majority and each group would enjoy equal rights and respect for its national, racial, or gender identity. The theory of a counterculture in this sense can be regarded as a transition from the unitary conception of society ("living organism" or "melting pot") to multiculturalism ("mosaics," "rainbow" etc.). The concept of revolution had to connect multiple groups marginalized by or isolated from the society with the unitary ideal of the transformation of society as a whole. Paradoxically, the concept of revolution as a total destruction of the existing system turned out to be the last theoretical representation of the society as one whole, if only on the grounds that the society had to become the total object of annihilation.

As soon as the Marxist-Maoist-Marcusean ideal of revolution was abandoned in the mid-1970s, Western society had no more critical

theories based on the unitary vision of society. After that, "unitary" and "critical" proved to be mutually exclusive terms. Critical theory now pursued not the transformation of the entire society but rather the growth of its internal diversity. The multiplicity of cultures and "subsocieties" had to replace the ideologically produced illusion of unity. Such a "minority rule" does not leave a social space for majorities, and even "white male culture" is reduced to the status of the *largest minority* as compared with the population of all other minority groups taken together (women, blacks, children, etc.). Subsequent divisions within the white male population, such as heterosexual and homosexual cultures, or youth and adult cultures, make for the further minoritization of any segment of the society.

The transcultural is based on the fact that many of the differences haunting Western and especially American society can be found within individuals.¹¹ This model takes into account the multiple identities of each individual and therefore is distinct both from the revolutionary model of the New Left and the multicultural model of collective identity politics. For example, youth culture can be viewed not as a separate stratum of the population but as each adult's inner experience and a transcultural drive. Adults who are faithful to their youthful commitments, friendships, and aspirations are not easily socialized in the way that the economic or ideological establishment requires them to be. Absolute socialization would mean that each person has his or her own strictly demarcated function in the mechanisms of economic and political productivity; however, each person has experiences and horizons that transcend this ideal of social unification. Among these transcultural experiences one can mention the experience of childhood, the experience of illness, the experience of love. We do not need to postulate the culture of "differently abled" people as a separate group only because almost all of us, or at least the vast majority of us, has at one time or another belonged to this group, has had the experience of illness, suffering, alienation.

In this sense, the majority of people, for shorter or longer periods, acquire different identities and belong to many actual or virtual minorities. Through love, we acquire the identity of our beloved, man or woman; through emigration or travel, the identities of foreigners . . . "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detaching him in himself."¹² Julia Kristeva's dramatic description should be

inverted: It is precisely this interior foreignness that grounds our understanding and affinity with the other. It is through the diversity of an individual experience that such distinct groups as men and women, adults and children, healthy and disabled, natives and foreigners can interact and find otherness within themselves.

One of the strongest factors resisting socialization in totalitarian states like the Soviet Union is people's attachment to their homes, but we do not need to establish a separate group of "homebodies" as a special minority because, again, they amount to the majority of the society. The task is not to dissect society into different organs, equalized and isolated "cultural castes," but to emphasize those multiple and fluid identities of each individual that allow him or her to transcend all group identities. This is the goal of transculture: to activate and mobilize transcultural elements in the society by invoking the value of those experiences and potentials that cannot be culturally stratified.

Instead of the revolutionary model, which opposes marginal elements to the social establishment; and instead of the differential model, which posits the multiplicity of collective identities, tolerant of but not interested in each other; transculture proposes the model of inherently "multicultural" individuals capable of crossing the borders of collective cultural identities. It is still possible to apply the term "critical theory" to transculturalism, but I would prefer to call it the theory of *positive otherness* because it does not so much criticize the unitary society or the dominant canon as it gives positive value to the experience of transcendence, not as an escape into the other world but as the *othering of this world*: via the experiences of childhood, youth, love, illness, loneliness, emigration, and pilgrimage . . .

The Marxist-Leninist Approach

The division of culture into "progressive" and "reactionary," or "the oppressive culture of the majority" and "the oppressed cultures of minorities" is still popular in contemporary politicized Western critical theory, after it dominated the now-extinct system of Soviet ideology for many decades. The division of one national culture into two opposing cultures was proposed by Lenin in his famous article "Critical Notes on the National Issue" (1913), later recognized as a model of Marxist discourse on culture. "There are two nations in each contemporary nation. . . . There are two national cultures in each national culture. There is [reactionary] Russian culture of Pushkevichs, Guchkovs and Struves,—but there is

also [progressive] Russian culture characterized by the names of Chernyshevsky and Plekhanov. The same two cultures are in the Ukraine, in Germany, France, England, among Jews, etc."¹³ Though unified by one national language, each culture, according to Lenin, is composed of two class subcultures: one of the oppressors—aristocratic and bourgeois culture, and another of the oppressed—democratic and revolutionary culture.

Though Lenin's hypothesis allegedly sought to diversify culture by having at least two of them instead of one, almost none of those figures he mentions as exemplifying these two cultures belonged to culture at all. Purishkevich, Guchkov, Struve, and Plekhanov were politicians of various orientations, from extreme nationalism and liberalism to Marxism. Chernyshevsky, a revolutionary writer of the 1860s, the author of the topical novel *What is to Be Done?*, also was more famous for his political ideas than aesthetic achievements. Is it just a coincidental choice of names on Lenin's part? Why did he not mention Pushkin or Gogol, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, Glinka or Tchaikovsky, the indubitable representatives of Russian culture? Unfortunately for Lenin's theory, none of these creators could exemplify this class division; none belonged to either an oppressive or an oppressed culture, the exploiters or the exploited, probably because culture cannot be described in these terms at all.

In the same way the division of Western culture into two poles, "majority" and "minorities," "canon" and "margins," ignores the multidimensionality of cultural systems and reflects its sociological or political simplification and leveling. "Oppressing" and "oppressed," "progressive" and "reactionary" are political or even partisan categories externally imposed on culture and useful indeed for understanding what culture is not. Culture is "cultural" to the degree that it transcends those barriers and oppositions that permeate the society and the struggle of political parties. Leo Tolstoy's art had value not because it was aristocratic or anti-aristocratic but because it transcended the boundary of "aristocratic-democratic." Both terms are derived from the sphere of politics and are applicable, in their proper sense, only to political regimes, the establishments of power, "cracies." Can we apply, then, the definitions "aristocratic" or "bourgeois" to cultures as a whole?

The assumption that the entire culture, including ethics and philosophy, science and poetry, is centered in the issue of power continues to dominate neo-Marxist and neo-Nietzschean discourse in the Western humanities of the late twentieth century. According to Michel Foucault, "the intellectual has a three-fold specificity: that of his class position

(whether as petty-bourgeois in the service of capitalism or 'organic' intellectual of the proletariat); that of his conditions of life and work, linked to his condition as an intellectual (the field of research, his place in a laboratory, the political and economic demands to which he submits or against which he rebels, in the hospital, in the university, etc.); lastly, the specificity of the politics of truth in our societies."¹⁴ To put it briefly, first, second, and third, the specificity of being intellectual is to be a politician.

This is exactly the fallacy about which culturology warns us: the identification of culture as a whole with one part of it, such as politics. The very term "transculture," as used in this section, could be easily replaced simply with "culture" if our notion of culture itself had not suffered so much from its political and other reductive adaptations. The prefix "trans-" is added in order to revitalize the meaning of culture in its dynamic and trans-formative quality, and to restore the integrative meaning of culture after it underwent a number of dissections, such as the one that we have cited from Lenin. If culture is reduced to the category of "social value," or "dominating canon," or "ideological superstructure," or "instrument of class struggle," then the notion of "transculture" is necessary at least to reinstate the domain of culture to its full dimension.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 61.
2. Quoted in *Newsweek*, 30 March 1981.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation* (Roundtable on 2 October 1994, at Villanova University), ed. with Commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University, 1997): 13–14.
4. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *The Truth about Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1995): 120, 122.
5. Merab Mamardashvili, "Drugoe nebo" (Another sky), in his book *Kak iz ponimainy filozofii* (How I understand philosophy) (Moscow: Progress, izdatskaja grupa "Kultura," 1992): 335, 337.

A similar "internal" resistance to what later became known as multiculturalism can be detected in black writing. Charles W. Chesnut (1858–1932), one of the first African American novelists whose books deal with race prejudice, observed as early as 1905: "We are told that we must glory in our color and zealously guard it as a priceless heritage. . . . Frankly, I take no stock in this doctrine. It seems to me a modern invention of the white people to perpetuate the color line. It is they who preach it, and it is their racial in-

- regiry which they wish to preserve: they have never been unduly careful of the purity of the black race. . . . Why should a man be proud any more that he should be ashamed of a thing for which he is not at all responsible? . . . Are we to help the white people to build up walls between themselves and us in fence in a gloomy back yard for our descendants to play in?" Charles W. Chesnut, "Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Its Cures: An Address Delivered before the Boston Historical and Literary Association," *Alexander's Magazine* 1 (July 1905): 25.
6. *Ibid.*, 336.
 7. T. S. Eliot wrote: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (Forr Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992): 764.
 8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 61.
 9. *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams & Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990): 484.
 10. *Ibid.*, 484.
 11. On the psychological and social significance of multiple cultural identities see Robert Jay Lifton, *Boundedness: Psychological Man in Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1970); Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
 12. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 1.
 13. *Istorija estetiki. Pamiatniki mirovoi esteticheskoi mysl'i* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970). Vol. 5, 210.
 14. "Truth and Power" (interview), in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982): 132.

Chapter 5

From Difference To Interference

Mikhail Epstein

From Identity/Opposition to Difference

The concept of difference stands between two related categories of identity and opposition. Opposition was the most powerful theoretical instrument of Hegelian and Marxist theory as based on the dialectical relationship between thesis and antithesis. The Marxist "class struggle" was the exemplification of this logical opposition in the history of society. The principle of identity is deeply connected with the principle of opposition and cannot be divorced from it. If opposition is the basic model of relationship between social groups then each individual is bound to identify with one of these groups. If the meaning of history lies in the opposition (struggle, antagonism) of exploited and exploiters, or North and South, or East and West, or imperialist and colonized, then one can participate in history only through identification with one of these polarized groups. Thus the quest for identity entails the construction of real or imaginable oppositions. I join one party, evidently, in order to oppose another party; I identify myself as a democrat in order to oppose myself to aristocrats or communists.

However, the categories of opposition and identity, though complementing each other, do not preclude the significance of the third category, which is difference. In fact, both identity and opposition are only ideational or ideological projections of difference. We can, for example, oppose black and white because these are not real entities but abstract qualities; however, we cannot oppose real things, such as rain and table or