



SPECIAL ISSUE

FERNANDO ORTIZ: CARIBBEAN AND  
MEDITERRANEAN COUNTERPOINTS

AFTERWORD

## Caribbean–Mediterranean counterpoint

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This afterword comments on the articles collected in this special issue dedicated to the counterpoint between the Mediterranean where Fernando Ortiz grew up, and the Caribbean where he lived most of his life. Under the influence of Lombroso, Ortiz began his career with now highly objectionable views of ritual practices of African origin in Cuba. By the early 1920s he had moved to the opposite position and begun to valorize retentions from Africa. He developed the idea of the *ajiacó*, a simmering stew, as a model for Cuban national formation through the mingling and absorption of diverse ethnic groups. He described this process as one of transculturation, the precise opposite of the xenophobia and cultural fundamentalism found in many European societies. That Mediterranean and Caribbean societies have affected one another for over five centuries encourages heuristic exploration of their intertwined pasts and presents. Ortiz's ideas are a guide to this open-ended enterprise.

Keywords: Fernando Ortiz, Cuba, the Mediterranean, transculturation, creolization, decreolization

The Caribbean and the Mediterranean are both “middle seas” separating continents and culture areas (Cahnman 1943: 209). Their histories have been tied together since a Genoese sailor funded by the Spanish crown landed on Hispaniola and Cuba in 1492. Columbus, and those who followed in his wake, brought with them the idea of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) recently tested in the purging of Jews and Muslims from Spanish society; notions that indigenous people in the Americas had inherited the stigma of the biblical curse of Ham; and the recent experience of casting non-Christian peoples outside the divinely ordained law of their Christian realm.<sup>1</sup> These Iberian explorations of hereditary inferiority, ac-

ording to the historian Ivan Hannaford (1996: 101), anticipated the parameters of essentialist homogeneity and indelible inheritance found in the modern idea of “race,” which arose independently after the Enlightenment. In discovering the West Indies Christian Europe found its enduring counterconcept, the “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991: 24), with its internal antinomies: heathen and yet redeemable through conversion, alternately noble and brutish.

A little over four centuries later, Fernando Ortiz floated a much different set of concepts back across the Atlantic. Chief among these was “transculturation,” a vision of a national body in open-ended flux, culturally changing as newcomers enter. He conceived this through the image of a simmering Cuban stew known as *ajiacó*. Although contributors to this collection have discussed this image, it is worth reproducing a central passage from Ortiz to appreciate his evocative narrative style:

And at every point our people has had, like the *ajiacó*, new and raw elements that have just entered the pot to be cooked; a heterogeneous conglomerate of diverse

1. On the eastern side of the Mediterranean, the Ottomans granted significant rights to Jewish and Christian subjects as fellow monotheists, although they did have to pay special taxes (Bowman, this issue; Braude 2014: 15). Prior to the fifteenth-century hardening of Christian boundaries in Spain, Muslims, Jews and Christians did establish a mode of coexistence (*convivencia*), the positive and negative sides of which have been much debated (Szpiech 2013).





racas and cultures, of many meats and crops, that stir up, mix with each other, and disintegrate into one single social bubbling. And there, on the bottom of the pot, is a new mass already settled out, produced by the elements that, when they disintegrated in the historical boil, were laying down as sediments their most tenacious essences in a rich and deliciously-garnished mixture. It already had its own character of creation. *Mestizaje* of kitchens, *mestizaje* of races, *mestizaje* of cultures. Dense broth of civilization that boils up on the Caribbean cookfire. . . .

This is why the composition is changed and cubanidad has a different flavor and consistency depending on whether it is scooped up from the bottom, from the fat belly of the pot, or from its mouth, where vegetables are still raw and the clear broth bubbles.

It can be said that, strictly speaking, in every people something similar occurs. (Ortiz 2014 [1940]: 462–63)

Take that Columbus! And Spain with your *limpieza!* And Europe with your bounded peoples protected by law watching others reduced to bare life and expelled, or worse (Stolcke, this issue)! Published at the outbreak of World War II the message could not have been clearer.

Ortiz's idea of transculturation emerged from the phenomenon of creolization and offered an analysis of that process. Early Spanish colonization largely wiped out the Taíno, Ciboney, and other indigenous peoples, leaving the Caribbean islands a zone where immigrants from Europe and Africa jostled together to forge a way of life suited to the environment and historical circumstances (Ortiz 1995 [1940]: 100). People born in the New World came to be called "Creoles," acclimatized and localized to become "hemispheric Americans of a new sort" (Mintz 1996: 302). The idea that Creoles might descend solely from Old World parents, and thus be "pure" Africans or Europeans, soon gave way to the factor of birth on the western side of the Atlantic. The bonds between these deracinated people developed into a stronger mutual allegiance during independence movements which pitted upstart Creoles—most of whom were, from a different perspective, also mestizos—against European motherlands.<sup>2</sup> The abolition of slavery, the arrival of Chinese la-

borers, and a raft of further European migrants, completed the basic ingredients of the Cuban ajiaco. The Trinidadian callaloo, with its sizeable South Asian population, would be a parallel culinary image for the mingling together of peoples in the formation of Caribbean nations (Khan 2004).

Born in Cuba in 1881 to a Cuban mother and a Spanish father, Ortiz's mother took him the following year to Menorca to live in the house of a relative who had returned after running a successful soap manufacturing business in Cuba. Creole by virtue of his birth in Cuba, Ortiz spent the next thirteen years on this Balearic island where his first languages were Menorquin and Castilian. As Horta (this issue) tells us, locals called his repatriated relative "*indiano*," to refer to the imprint of having lived in the West Indies.<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting to know if that term contained disdain for the deculturation or denaturing a Spaniard might be presumed to have undergone in the tropics, thereby continuing a trope from the age of exploration (Cañizares-Esguerra 1999). Perhaps during his childhood Ortiz doubted whether he would be returning to Cuba or if he was indeed Cuban himself. He was potentially decreolizing, and he spoke Spanish with a Menorcan accent to the end of his life (Valdés Bernal, this issue). He may not have had a Cuban Spanish accent, but it should be noted that no Creole Spanish developed in Cuba.<sup>4</sup> There are *criollos*, but no *Criollo*.

Ortiz's return to Cuba in 1895 for university studies answered the question of his commitment to Cuba, and his appointment as Cuban consul in Marseilles, Genoa, and La Coruña (1902–1906) indicated a reciprocal commitment. He finally returned to reside permanently in Cuba at the age of twenty-five. This personal journey, moral and geographical, informed, in my view, the framing of his delicate distinction between *cubanidad* and *cubanía*. The former is the actually existing state of Cuban culture at any time, the ajiaco. Cubanía, on

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statement that "*Cubano es más que blanco, más que mulato, más que negro*" (Palmié 2013: 97).

2. See, for example, Bolívar's proclamation at Angostura in 1819: "We are not Europeans, we are not Indians; we are but a mixed species of aborigines and Spaniards. Americans by birth, and Europeans by law . . . we are struggling to maintain ourselves in the country that gave us birth against the [Spanish] invaders" (cited in Palmié 2007: 70). And the Cuban national hero Martí's famous

3. According to Ortiz (2014: 472): "Each Spaniard who arrived in Cuba, by the simple fact of that arrival, was already different from what he had been; he was no longer a Spaniard from Spain but an Indian Spaniard."  
4. Spanish-based Creole languages are generally hard to find, a matter much discussed by linguists. See Díaz-Campos and Clements 2008.



the other hand, is the relationship to *cubanidad*, the ethical commitment to it. *Cubanidad* is what is; *cubanía* is the identification with this reality—the very matters Ortiz worked through as a young person during his years outside Cuba. In his essay on “The human factors of *cubanidad*,” written as he neared the age of sixty, he reconciled the vicissitudes of his life with the framework of Cuban ethnogenesis:

Is the Cuban the person born in Cuba? In a primary and strict sense, yes, but with great reservations. First, because not few are the people who, having been born in Cuba, soon spread themselves in other lands, gaining exotic customs and manners. Their only Cuban quality is the accident of having seen their first sun in Cuba; they do not so much as recognize their native land. Second, because not uncommonly found are the Cubans, citizens or no, who, born across the seas, have grown and formed their personalities here, among the Cuban people. They have integrated themselves into its mass and are indistinguishable from the natives. . . . These foreign-born Cubans are the ones who, as folklore says, have gone native like plantains. (Ortiz 2014 [1940]: 458–59)

Ortiz goes on to make a point about *cubanía* that holds for creolization generally. There was no going back home for most of those who fetched up on the island and became Cuban together. This held foremost of all for the African slave population, who, Ortiz speculates (2014 [1940]: 478), felt the sentiment of *cubanía* before any others. *Cubanía* indicates that spirit of joining *cubanidad*, whether by jumping in with both feet, by gradual realization, or through spontaneous personal decision. The relative fervor of *cubanía* could be thought of as heat applied to the *ajiaco* pot (*olla*), speeding or slowing the fusion of flavors.

Simon Harrison (2004) has contended that the alluvial landscape of the Middle Sepik in Papua New Guinea conditions a historical forgetfulness. Rivers change course and wash the past away. The sedimentary geology of Britain, by contrast, holds the past in strata that make it possible to study gradual change along linear chronologies. This cumulative, stratigraphic European historical imagination (Koselleck 2018: 9) may be applied in a new comparison with Ortiz’s image of the igneous and metamorphic process of Caribbean transculturation; a low temperature baking of history in Europe as against a firing of it under the varying pressure of *cubanía* in the Caribbean. Ortiz captures these contrasting historical for-

mations in the following reflection: “The whole gamut of culture run by Europe in a span of more than four millennia took place in Cuba in less than four centuries. In Europe the change was step by step; here it was by leaps and bounds” (1995 [1940]: 99). Archaeologists and historians have studied and restored the monuments and laid out the sequence of Mediterranean history like an open book that contemporary societies may look on with a pride encouraged by the flattering (and economically beneficial) visits of tourists. In the Caribbean, historical records past a certain point in time are difficult to come by, and the all-consuming process of transculturation might dispose people to a lack of interest in their ethnic origins. For a Mediterraneanist, the question of how Caribbean peoples relate to their distant pasts, whether European, African, or Asian is an intriguing one. Has the fusion of transculturation melted all the documentary evidence? Do commitments to local creole social formations like *cubanidad* leave room for real interest in one’s forbears beyond the island?<sup>5</sup>

The essays in this issue reveal Ortiz’s contradictory positions on the question of retentions from Africa in the Cuban present. In a 1905 article he exhorted researchers to identify survivals of African practices in Cuba and to trace them back to their African origins (Naranjo Orovio, this issue). It is not clear how rigorous such early historical investigations were, but Naranjo Orovio points out that his motivation was the presentist one of creating “an inclusive national imaginary” in which culture could be understood as an integrated and harmonious whole. It sounds like an orientation compatible with Boas’s idea of historically particular cultures formed through borrowing and diffusion, but Boas seems not to have been a guiding influence on Ortiz. In *Los negros brujos* (1973 [1906]), Ortiz, who had just taken on the job of public prosecutor in Havana, took a negative view of African rituals as bound up with criminality (Sarró, this issue). His approach drew on Cesare Lombroso’s theory that criminal behavior resulted from atavistic reversion to a less evolved stage of humanity that could be discerned in the physiognomy of offenders (Pick 1989: 122). Ortiz was working with an evolutionary idea of “culture” stemming from Tylor, who held that

5. The current “Yorubization” of Afro-Cuban practices will be considered further below. The neo-Taíno movement in Puerto Rico, where adherents are campaigning to get “tribal recognition” from the US government shows that indigenous ancestry may also become a focus.



“survivals” were vestiges from earlier stages of development that needed to be extirpated in the current stage of civilization, which he and his readers inhabited. After court trials for *brujería* (witchcraft), the police transferred seized evidence to the local museum, thus advancing the effort of objectifying Africanisms and separating them from contemporary society’s self-image. Ortiz’s stance on these matters was completely out of character with his later idea of transculturation, and the tilt between these two extremes remains one of the fascinating anomalies of his life (Sarró, this issue; Palmié, this issue). In his 1906 view, transmission of *brujería* practices from African-born to Creole practitioners entailed their distortion into antisocial instruments. A more negative view of survivals can hardly be imagined.

Prior to Ortiz’s resort to the Victorian anthropological notion of “survivals” Mediterranean scholars such as the late nineteenth-century Greek folklorist Nikolaos Politis (Herzfeld 2020) had interpreted their value entirely differently. Granted that descent from illustrious predecessors such as the ancient Greeks conferred prestige, then identifying survivals from them in contemporary life—even pagan holdovers such as gorgons and nereids within an Orthodox Christian society—placed the present-day Greeks in a good light. Fifty years before Politis, a Neapolitan cleric and antiquarian, Andrea de Jorio, published *Gesture in Naples and gesture in classical antiquity* (2000 [1832]). He contended in this comprehensive, illustrated study that an understanding of contemporary gestures enabled better understanding of the ancient artworks then coming to light at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Later in his career Ortiz came to view Africanisms in Cuba more positively and it would be interesting to know if, in addition to his focus on music, ritual and language, he devoted attention to gesture. His contemporary, and competitor, Herskovits, did document African American gestures such as turning the head and covering the mouth while laughing as retentions from Africa in the New World. He classed this material under the category of “motor habits” (Herskovits 1990 [1941]: 152).

The possibility of incorporating contemporary African cultural forms (language, music, dance, ritual) into Cuban practices such as *santería* points to the limits of Ortiz’s *ajiaco* model. Amanda Villepastour’s 2018 visit to Cuba in the company of a Yoruba priestess stimulated occasional Creole resistance to the authority of non-Cuban outsiders (Villepastour, this issue)—a negative answer to the question I posed above about interest in

forebears beyond the island. Overall, however, there appears to have been a positive response to this question if one considers the general enthusiasm for Nigerian ideas in a Yorubization of Afro-Cuban religious practice ongoing since the 1990s. The *Lucumí* language, for example, possibly once a dialect of Yoruba, had, over time, been pared down to a ritual language without productive speakers. The possibility of learning Yoruba language, dance, and ritual techniques from Nigerian specialists offered the chance to reinvigorate Afro-Cuban religion on the basis of supposedly authentic knowledge. In restoring *Lucumí* and *santería* to something putatively approaching their earlier form, the effect was to lift them off the bottom of the olla in a decreolizing action that positioned them nearer the surface as new additions to the *ajiaco*. Yet, as Villepastour points out, reconstituting these rituals according to Yoruba forms risks making them into something they never were because the Yoruba represented only 12 percent of African slaves brought to Cuba. Contemporary *santería* has boiled down from many different African traditions.

Perhaps the effect of this “Yoruba reversion enterprise” is to lift *santería* and *Ifá* divination out of the Cuban cooking process altogether, and place them in a new transnational space of fusion between Cuba and Nigeria. Canals (this issue) offers a model of what that might look like in his study of the cult of *María Lionza*, a plural (White, Mestizo, Indian, or Black) goddess of Venezuelan origin. The classic depiction of her naked astride a tapir has provoked ever more creative depictions of her, verging into science fiction. These images, and the ritual practices that they orientate, have spread around the world via internet and social media. As Canals points out, the creators and followers of these proliferating images treat them as authentically powerful, not as pale copies. The iconography of *María Lionza* thus expands in unlimited transculturation. The noteworthy cult following in Spain presents the reverse of the Yorubization of Cuba. Here the Old World submits to the siren call of the former colony.

These last two cases have gone beyond Ortiz’s model of a cooking process taking place in the Cuban olla—a modern conception premised on singularity and steady, if open-ended and always emergent, integration. Considering this Durkheimian emphasis on cohesion, perhaps Malinowski’s (1995 [1940]) characterization of Ortiz as a functionalist was not entirely self-serving. Kahn’s consideration (this issue) of Haitians fleeing their island adds one more scenario to consider. In trying to make an



inter-olla move from their island version of the ajiaco to the American melting pot Haitians find themselves at sea hemmed in by the US Coast Guard. They are effectively “kettled”<sup>6</sup> in international waters by Coast Guard cutters, sometimes detained at Guantanamo, and generally left to stew in an *olla caribeña*. As this cat-and-mouse game has developed over time the US border control authorities have purchased ever more sophisticated surveillance equipment while the Haitians have invested in the help of spirits known as *djab* to make themselves invisible to detection. Pina-Cabral’s idea (this issue) of “ontological weight” provides an illuminating ethnographic illustration of how realities can appear or disappear. Until recently, in the Alto Minho region of Portugal maize served as the metric of moral personhood, property measurement, and identity. Owning sufficient land to produce enough maize to make bread for one’s family measured belonging in the commune. Mere ownership of a house did not qualify. This could not have been the case before maize was introduced a few hundred years ago.<sup>7</sup> Nor will it be the case in the future. In the wake of return migration and EU membership, salaried employment is taking its place in an example of what Ardener (2007: 150) termed “parameter collapse,” a moment when the current world structure turns inside out and new realities become apparent as when passing the twist in a Möbius strip. Minhoto village identity, like Haitian migrants at sea, can appear and disappear as one moves through perspectival positions.

The ajiaco, as mentioned at the outset, offers a counterpoint to right-wing European nationalist exclusionism which, writing in the 1990s, Stolcke (this issue) showed to be based on cultural fundamentalism rather than racism. Her analysis of the differences between these two options is persuasive, yet since its original publication the racialization of categories such as “ethnicity” and “migrant” has worked to convert cultural fundamental-

ism into a manifestly racist attitude. Her study illuminates the bifurcated situation of today where xenophobes can be fully convinced that they are not racists because they do not embrace scientific racism per se, but only seek to protect the integrity of national culture by securing borders. However, the version of national culture which they defend is typically White, and non-White immigrants are discriminatorily excluded from entering it. Racism masquerades as non-racism in a project that is the very opposite of Ortiz’s transculturation.

This is the central counterpoint between the Mediterranean and Caribbean that emerges from this collection. Mediterranean societies have long produced insulating boundaries—ghettoes, walls, encystations—that keep people from mixing (Bowman, this issue). Yet the contributions also show that the Mediterranean cannot be kept out of the Caribbean nor vice versa. Mediterranean images may be put to oppressive use as in Ortiz’s evocation of the Roman toga (Sarró, this issue) as the cloak of European reason recommended for protection against the seductions of Afro-Cuban magic. On the other hand, Ortiz’s ideas of transculturation and the ajiaco, as this collection demonstrates, offer the glimpse of a future much different from the one afforded by ethnonationalism and this has attracted European thinkers since Malinowski. Practices such as the forcing back of refugees into transit countries have been trialed and traded back and forth between the two regions. Like the pidgin languages which once took shape in the slave castles of Africa or on Caribbean plantations, new idioms are arising in Mediterranean encounters between migrant ships and coastal authorities (Jacquemet 2020), and in detention camps on islands like Lesvos (Broomfield 2017). What is evident, in the wake of this collection, is that the Caribbean and the Mediterranean may be read contrapuntally, as a heuristic venture into the polyphonic nature of social worlds—not just in the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, but globally. Critically taking a page out of Ortiz’s book may be a step in that direction.

## References

6. Kettling is a tactic developed by British police to deal with protestors. It involves containing them by cutting off the exits from a street or a bridge and then permitting demonstrators to leave at a time of their choosing, and arresting some of them.
  7. The Spanish first encountered maize on the island of Hispaniola. According to the *OED* the word first appears in 1500 in Columbus’s diary as *mahíz*, from Taíno *mahiz* (or *mahís*).
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