Interculturalism, multiculturalism, and intercultural studies: Questioning definitions and repositioning strategies

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1 Between politics and science: current discourses on intercultural transits

This article approaches the topic of intercultural studies and the concept of interculturalism (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006; Ibanez and Saenz 2006; Costa and Lacerda 2007; Sarmento 2010; Dervin et al. 2011) as movement, communication, dynamics, encounter between cultures, with the purpose of discussing their pragmatic consequences in academia and society. Ultimately, the objectives of this article are as scientific as political, because the intercultural stands at the junction of knowledge and politics (Dervin et al. 2011: 1). The contemporary intercultural travel is a global journey, a circumnavigation powered by the speed of new technologies and this concept of intercultural underwrites all the comings and goings, the transmission and reception of information that are implicit in the communication, in the diversity, and in the transit that the prefix inter suggests. Intercultural transits have always been present, from the perverse intercultural dialogue of colonialism to the current cultural heteroglossia of the Internet. This is why we propose to examine the motivations, characteristics, and regulations of cultural interactions in their perpetual movement, devoid of spatial or temporal borders, in a dangerous but stimulating indefinition of limits. Normative practices of modern research in the vast field of the humanities do not privilege
relations of permanence any longer, to the detriment of relations of movement, a perspective that changed as a result of the endless mobilities that travel the world today. As Stuart Hall (1994) states, the notions of belonging and homeland have been reconceptualized in contexts of migration, deterritorialization, diaspora, virtuality, digitalization, and other features of the globalized world, that make even more pertinent the principle that cultural identities are not fixed, but fluid; not given, but performed.

In this way we cross the first great border to intercultural transit – the frontier created by the concept of culture itself – avoiding the commonplace notion of the intercultural as simply us versus them, and steering clear of the fundamental error of interculturalism that ignores the diversity and dynamism contained in its own definition. This approach generates an interdisciplinary dialogue between fields that have traditionally ignored each other, because it is also intercultural at its source and subjects, not only in the objects that are examined; because one should not fear the alterity that, after all, one proposes to study. This notion of intercultural functions as a sort of third space, to quote from Homi Bhabha (1994). A third space for hybridity, subversion, transgression. Hybridity – and cultural translation, which Bhabha regards as a synonym for hybridity – is politically subversive. Hybridity is the space where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical of conservative political and academic concepts, including the old opposition between theory and practice, critical reflection and politics, do not work anymore. They do not work in intercultural studies either, in the way we understand them.

Networks and echoes emanating from the international academic community spread rapidly throughout the globe, and their multiple forms of cultural interaction bring with them their own forms of manipulation and subversion of power. These actions carried out in the peripheries – and which are, in turn, central in the lives and experiences of individuals – can be designated and described, more or less metaphorically, as “borderzones” (Bruner 1996: 157–179), “thresholds” (Davcheva et al. 2011: 144), “intersecting discursive fields” (Tsing 1993), academic diasporas, or “spaces on the side of the road” (Stewart 1996), all of them reflecting the dialogic nature of culture and of intercultural studies. In contemporary cultural diversity, past and present, global and local, converge in the analysis of concepts and objects closely related to ongoing political, economic, social, and cultural transformations. Scientific research is also an area of intersections, of permanent cultural translation; that is, of reinterpretation, of repositioning of symbols and signs within existing hierarchies. In this reflection on intercultural studies, we encourage critical readings that attempt to look beyond arbitrary meanings, favoring contextualized interpretations that, in their uncertainty, are likely to produce new hypotheses, theories, and explanations.
For Judith Butler, the universal – here understood as a synonym of hegemony, a Gramscian combination of power and consent (Gramsci 1971) – can only be conceptualized in articulation with its own peripheries, the aforementioned “borderzones,” “spaces on the side of the road,” and other metaphors. Thus, what has been excluded from the concept of universality forces this same concept – from the outside, from the margins – to accept and include it again, which can only happen when the concept itself has evolved enough to include its own excluded. This pressure eventually leads to the rearticulation of the current concept of universality and its power. To the process through which universality readmits its own excluded, Butler calls “translation.” Cultural translation – both as the “return of the excluded” and as Bhabha’s hybridity – is a major force of contemporary democracy, also in the academic field. (Butler 1996: 45–51; Butler et al. 2000)

Therefore, intercultural studies are the place where the overlapping of cultures occurs, which is the characteristic of a site of cultural translation. This sort of cultural translation may work as that “return of the excluded,” pushing limits, bringing about epistemological changes and opening new spaces for free discussion and independent research. Because, for Bhabha, as well as for the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006, 2008), the potential for change is located at the peripheries. Peripheries marked by hybridity, where the “new arrivals” (Santos 2006) – “new arrivals” or “excluded” like polytechnics and universities from peripheral countries and regions, like unconventional research groups, like young female academics – are able to use subversion to undermine the strategies of the powerful, regardless of who they are.

When talking about the intercultural experience, it is tempting to talk on behalf of the others – a notion that is always contingent and relational, as “we” are the others’ other –, but seldom do we grant a voice to those “others” themselves. (Cerqueira 2013) However, the true intercultural experience occurs when we are able to see ourselves and our work as if we were those so-called others, whose otherness originates from their nationality, gender, orientation, academic background, or field of research. Let us remember that Derrida (1981[1972]) has shown how the construction of an identity is always based on exclusion and that a violent hierarchy results of such dichotomous pairs, as in the binomials man/woman, white/black, colonizer/colonized, straight/gay, elite/masses, and nowadays also in science and technology/arts and humanities.

But local and global practices and knowledge – with their associated discursive productions – do not form a dichotomy. Instead, their correlation provides a stimulating dynamic tension, as the search for local concepts generates new concepts, which encourage the challenge of epistemological and phenomenological adaptation, under a genuinely interdisciplinary and intercultural perspective.
Any approach must be located within the network of ideological and material contexts of a given region, which is always an evolving territory. In a post-colonial world, the intersections of past and present, global and local, define the guidelines to explore the negotiation and evolution of concepts, as well as the material forces that influence individuals, communities and nations. Post-colonial is understood here as synonymous with the actual situation of former colonies and colonial powers, nowadays located somewhere between the colonial legacy, the attempt to reach a (re)new(ed) national consciousness and the policies of cultural conflict, in which different groups are trying simultaneously to set their own identities, always under the strong influence of global hegemonies. Post-colonial societies, either Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern, are, according to Achille Mbembe, composed of a plurality of spheres and arenas, each with its own logic, and yet likely to be interwoven with other logics, in a continuous improvisation and negotiation (1992: 5). This constant need to negotiate and construct identity actually underlies life in most territories of the world, which communities express in a polyphony of narratives.

The concept of interculturalism here explored and the related idea of intercultural experience also develops from polyphonic narratives of dynamic tensions. This concept of interculturalism might be compared to the concept of multiculturalism, this latter understood as a delimited, static space, within which different cultures cohabit in a self-enclosed, silent ignorance. But in reality, the multicultural space exists as a result of intercultural, multidirectional and reciprocal (random?) movements, and as such, shall be discussed herein (Sarmento 2010).

In general, multiculturalism has been analyzed under an ontological approach, as an existing or desired social reality. Multiculturalism also has been widely subjected to a political-ideological study, focusing both on the dominant or host society, and on the migrant or (alleged) minority groups. Conversely, interculturalism is analyzable as movement with an underlying stream of consciousness, as manifested in critically aware journeys, in mutual knowledge, understanding, and communication. Interculturalism is then, and preferably, a hermeneutic option, an epistemological approach, as Martine Abdallah-Pretceille emphasizes, because no fact is intercultural per se, nor is interculturalism an attribute of the object. Only intercultural analysis can give it this character, through a paradigm of hybrid, segmentary, and heterogeneous thinking (2006: 480–483).

Multiculturalism is a judgment of existence: in a same physical or conceptual space, different people coexist, from different cultures (in terms of memories, options, references, values, preferences, projects, expectations, experiences, practices, and attitudes), but – under ideal circumstances – they mutually recognize
the right to live in common. Multiculturalism preaches not only the right to share a territory, but also the obligation to live in it according to the cultures of those various groups and communities. But then, multiculturalism tends to assume a utopian character, stripped of dilemmatic or conflicting aspects, as it is impossible to ignore all impending cases of conflict of norms, values, and practices, especially those that are rooted in potentially or actually incompatible standards of conduct. By following this argument, and bearing in mind that utopias are by definition unreal, then it is tempting to pretend a shocked disappointment and jump into the easy conclusion that it is in fact impossible for different cultures to coexist. Therefore, when this discourse becomes actual practice, those who are identified as agents of difference might be segregated or ultimately erased – through illegalization, deportation, imprisonment, assassination – for the sake of common sense, so that a normal(ized) society may prevail.

In fact, there are political implications when distinguishing multiculturalism from interculturalism. The political exploitation and ideological abuse of the concept of multiculturalism can be related to the polemical speech by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who declared the “death of multiculturalism,” without elaborating on the nature and causes of such failure. Merkel was referring to the alleged illusion that Germans and foreign workers could live side by side, once lost the hope that “they wouldn’t stay,” “they” being the gastarbeiter’s ‘guest workers,’ who arrived in Germany to fill the labor shortage during the economic boom of the 1960s (The Guardian, 17 October 2010). In Merkel’s speech, the representation of these groups and their competences is underpinned by a certain shared notion of culture, multicultural, and their agents. The “death of multiculturalism” implies that its agents, those who have brought along multiplicity and difference, have also failed and are no longer welcome. But recent history – in Germany and elsewhere – has taught us that discursive categories and symbolic markers of identity have actual and very dramatic effects in the everyday experience of groups and individuals.

According to Meer and Modood (2012), there are four ways in which conceptions of interculturalism are being positively contrasted with multiculturalism. These are, first, as something greater than coexistence, interculturalism is allegedly more geared toward interaction and dialogue than multiculturalism. Second, that interculturalism is conceived as something less groupist or more yielding of synthesis than multiculturalism. Third, that interculturalism is something more committed to a stronger sense of the whole, in terms of such things as societal cohesion and national citizenship. Finally, that where multiculturalism may be illiberal and relativistic, interculturalism is more likely to lead to criticism of illiberal cultural practices, as part of the process of intercultural dialogue. Modood goes even further to state that the multicultural framework has allowed
the evolution from biological racism to cultural racism, emphasizing the old dichotomy of self and other, and producing an idea of culture that is naturalistic and essentialist, through the homogenization of identities (Werbner and Modood 1999: 3–4). Indeed, racism can exist without race, operating through reductionist discourses that favor the cultural explanation at the expense of other levels of analysis, and approaching interactions in a mono-causal way (Abdallah-Pretceille 1985). Such interpretations posit that cultures, in essence, occupy different, irregular spaces, and that cultural belonging explains mutually exclusive and incompatible behaviors.

Despite the obvious difficulty of the task, for the sake of the argument, it is appropriate to establish here a brief diachronic perspective. The concept of interculturalism emerged in France during the 1970s, in the specific context of migration, due to the need for inclusion of immigrant children and consequent adaptation of educational methods in the face of an increasingly multicultural society. This simple chronological information contains two conceptions already noted above, since the use of the prefix inter assumes that two or more cultures interact, while the prefix multi does not assume hybridization, but instead the coexistence of various cultures, stratified and hierarchical.

On the other hand, the concept of multiculturalism prevails in the Anglo-Saxon world, where groups of different cultural matrices are integrated in public life in order to ensure social cohesion, but not inclusion. Integrating or assimilating migrants is not part of the same national and societal project as creating a society that offers similar opportunities to everyone. And even if it is not made clear right away, not everyone of foreign nationality is labeled similarly. Moreover, a “well-integrated” person is one who has become “like us” and thus, implicitly, will never become us (Dervin et al. 2011: 7–8). Ultimately, a “well-integrated” person has rejected or concealed those features that might be identified as foreign, thus rejecting or concealing a significant part (if not all) of her/his own identity, the stable core to one’s individuality and sense of personal location.

Interestingly, a significant part of the existing literature on multiculturalism in English is, in fact, an exhaustive list of differences between an individual us shocked but full of good will, and a collective other, characterized as homogeneous and hypersensitive to offenses to their strange traditions. This literature takes the form of empirical manuals with very pragmatic purposes: to facilitate economic relations with exotic partners, and/or become popular university toolkits. Departing invariably from artificial situations of conflict, misunderstanding, lack of communication, latent hostility, and general embarrassment caused by the exposure to the cultural norms and practices of the other (see: Storti 1994, 2001; Trompenaars and Hampden Turner 1997; Dresser 2005), seldom do the
explanations provided equate the possibility of a certain action being dictated by the individual’s conscience. For the authors who favor this essentialist approach, it seems to be inconceivable that a non-Western (or even non-Anglo-Saxon) behavior may derive from something other than the simple dictates of tradition and culture, met without dissonance or place for the agency of autonomous individuals.

When highlighting inter-group differences instead of intra-group and inter-individual differences, business, education, training, and communication in general become strictly culturalized. Yet it should be recognized that between the sheer refusal of the cultural dimension and the overemphasis on culture as the determining factor of behavior, the margin is narrow. But any excessive focus on the different characteristics of others leads to exoticism as well as to communicational void, and enhances, consciously or not, stereotype and prejudice, because all work focusing on the other is political and expresses power relationships. When an individual – who is seldom the prototype of a group – fails to be incorporated into the expected (prejudged) framework, serious difficulties arise, because in reality people cannot be understood outside of a process of communication and exchange. Questioning one’s identity in relation to others is an integral part of intercultural studies, as the work of analysis and of acquiring knowledge applies to others as much as to oneself (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006: 476–478).

However, what the present formulation of interculturalism emphasizes is, beyond question, communication. Indeed, communication is the defining characteristic and the central means through which “an intercultural approach aims to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different backgrounds” (Wood et al. 2006: 9). As the authors maintain, multiculturalism has been founded on the belief in tolerance between cultures, but it is not always the case that multicultural places are open places. Interculturalism, on the other hand, entails openness – as a spatial logic of contact and dynamism – and, while openness in itself is not the guarantee of interculturalism, it provides the setting for its development (Wood et al. 2006: 7). This depiction of interculturalism as facilitating an interactive and dynamic cultural exchange is concerned with the task of developing cohesive societies, by turning notions of singular identities into notions of multiple ones. Based upon a deep sharing of differences of culture and experience, interculturalism encourages the formation of interdependencies, which structure identities that go beyond nations or simplified ethnicities (Booth 2003: 432).

Interculturalism holds that modern societies should, for the sake of their future, accept cultural interaction within and outside the boundaries of the nation, which, incidentally, is the natural and observable course of history, since
the culture of a people is not static, but rather active and subject to permanent adjustments. All in all, multiculturalism seems to have become the receptacle into which Western nations have deposited their anxieties arising from the social and economic changes underway, and which are much more severe than those arising from the policies of immigration and integration.

A statement that marks the emphasis currently placed on interculturalism can be found on the seventh “Common Basic Principle[s] for Immigrant Integration” of the European Union (European Commission 2004), which argues that the frequent interaction between immigrants and citizens of the member states is a fundamental mechanism for integration, emphasizing the importance of communal forums, intercultural dialogue, and information about immigrants and their cultures. The key point here is the inverse of a mere celebration of diversity of cultures as folklore or as ethnic versions of classic multiculturalism. What is involved here is the positive encouragement of actual encounters between different groups and the creation of dialogue and joint activities. Of course this does not mean that intercultural dialogue has not been part of the multicultural philosophy and practice. But it becomes evident that the idea of multiculturalism has succumbed easily to an interpretation of ethnic cultures, with strictly defined boundaries and static essential components, without internal dissent. In other words, multiculturalism has been oriented toward essentialism, albeit tacitly or implicitly, as is the case of the above cited manuals of intercultural communication.

Mainstream multiculturalism, at its core, normalizes the idea that there are different categories of human beings, “essentialized, primordial, and fixed. Furthermore, multiculturalism posits that it is natural to ‘stick with your own kind’ ” (Kromidas 2011: 73). In her thought-provoking work on multiculturalism, essentialism and critical cosmopolitanism in New York primary schools, Maria Kromidas describes a new accommodationist and routinized multiculturalism that has been hegemonically incorporated as the perfect ideological counterpart to global capitalism, very distant from any notion of social justice. Relying heavily on the works by Abdallah-Pretceille, Kromidas also contrasts a multiculturalism that depends on a reified and static conception of culture, with an interculturalism that deconstructs this homogeneous entity, seeking a complex and dynamic multiplicity instead. The former stresses typologies and categorizations while the latter emphasizes mutations, fusions, and relations. Multiculturalism is obsessed with the other and what one needs to know about him/her, while interculturalism focuses on the self, questioning one’s identity in relation to others. The ultimate goal of the former is a cautious tolerance, while that of the latter is conviviality, e.g., and again, communication. The very borders that encapsulate the static taxonomy of multiculturalism become the object of critique of interculturalism.
(Kromidas 2011: 75). For Abdallah-Pretceille, interculturalism implies the shift from an analysis in terms of structures and states to one of complex, changeable, and arbitrary situations, processes, and cultural phenomena, such as acculturation, assimilation, resistance, identity, or hybridity. In brief, culture-in-action, instead of culture as an object: That is the aim of intercultural research (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006: 479–481).

2 Toward translation and synthesis

The theoretical and practical rationale of our approach to interculturalism and intercultural studies acts without hierarchies or fragmentation. So as to affirm the interconnectedness of all human beings and their mutual complementarity, it is essential to practice a new ontology that is free of inherited dualisms and makes them dynamic instead, that transcends opposites and their implied subordination, that seeks what is strange in what is familiar and vice versa. This relational and even dialectic epistemology is crucial for a study on interculturalism that goes beyond meaningless cultural multiplicity (Ibanez and Saenz 2006: 14–15). We use here the term dialectic because, though conflict is necessarily part of the intercultural process – both in social practice and in academic research – synthesis will hopefully emerge from it.

Intercultural dialogue occurs among individuals who speak different languages and for whom words and objects have diverse meanings. However, this does not result into a new Tower of Babel, nor into social chaos, because there is an attempt at communication, and there is something that is actually shared, which is exactly what allows awareness of and openness to differences. Social and linguistic diversity within a culture are a source of wealth that contributes its part to the diversity resulting from the existence of a plurality of cultures in the world. The communicative competence of the users of a language develops at both the intracultural and the intercultural level. In other words, speakers need to be aware of the variety of registers and of the plurality of texts and discourses that exist in a culture, either their own or other, following the principle of self- and hetero-analysis, characteristic of intercultural studies. The richness of the worlds discovered through linguistic diversity and communicable meanings is such that every translation is a task necessarily imperfect. As a prerequisite for intercultural dialogue, we must recognize the different languages used by other actors and know their “hidden dimension[s]” (Hall 1992 [1966]), even if we cannot do it otherwise than through translation, in order to assimilate the unknown culture as a variation of our own. But practices and styles of translation that are not truly interpretative may hinder rather than facilitate intercultural
communication. The hegemonic power of a culture can be enhanced if we accept as natural a translation in which the voices of other cultures are domesticated, without being understood as originated elsewhere. Cultural polyphony can be both facilitated and stalled by academic discourse, so great is the responsibility of the studies conducted on the coexistence and interpenetration of voices from different cultures (Ibanez and Saenz 2006: 18).

This is why the work of the translator acquires new dimensions: On the one hand, the translator establishes relationships that make knowledge more accessible, which bring people and cultures together; on the other hand, she/he directly interferes in her/his country’s textual production, to the extent that she/he recreates, according to a pre-determined model, aesthetic shapes and ideas to be included in her/his own tradition. André Lefevere states that “[translation] is potentially subversive and […] potentially conservative” (1990: 27). The subversive nature of translation creates a renewed vision of the figure of the translator, granting her/him an importance that was not evident before, because “translation is one of the most obvious forms of image making, of manipulation, that we have” (Lefevere 1990: 26). Thus, the study of translation can tell a lot not only about the literary world, but also about the actual world in general. In other words, translation is another path for the study of interculturalism; it is a major discipline within the wide scope of intercultural studies.

The transformation of the discourse of multiculturalism into an intercultural discourse reinforces principles that emphasize the historical interconnectedness of cultures. Societies have never been static throughout history, as they have always adapted and changed according to the stimuli received from other cultures. The main difference is that, nowadays, cultural contacts and exchanges occur in a much faster and globalized way. When Antonio Perotti writes that “the intercultural approach to the teaching of History is critical for the understanding of cultural diversity in European societies” (2003: 58), he is making a statement with historiographical implications, since intercultural understanding implies necessarily a search for syncretic expressions, that allow us to achieve a truly universal history, composed by all groups in communication. Thus, the centrality of dialogue for a new ethics of the intercultural requires not only respect for other cultures, but also the understanding of how much they already have in common, how they have interacted in the course of time, and how those similarities provide a basis for the development of new shared insights.

Taking as a paradigmatic case the history of Portuguese expansion, it becomes clear that even in a system of cultural dominance, the global interaction provided by the decompartmentalization of the world was made of reciprocal influences. The consequences of Portuguese expansion took place not only throughout the empire, but also at the metropolis back home, because of the way
overseas people, their objects, habits and beliefs merged into Portuguese society, leaving indelible traces in various fields, from visual arts to popular and erudite music, from poetry to myth, from culinary to navigation instruments, from philosophy to natural sciences. Although the crimes of colonial history are obvious, it would nevertheless be relevant to question – albeit carefully and critically – the process of European expansion as a vehicle for the creation of syncretism, with contributions from multiple sources, encompassing similarities and differences, where fusions happened alongside segregation (Costa and Lacerda 2007: 21). And here we are talking about dialectics and synthesis, once again.

It comes as a result that the colonial and post-colonial world is a space of constant translation, a permanent contact zone, to quote from Boaventura Sousa Santos, a worldwide frontier where peripheral practices and epistemologies are the first to be noticed, though seldom understood. Intercultural encounters and communication – or translation – bring the aspects that each culture considers to be more central or relevant into the contact zone (Santos 2006: 121). Any narrative invariably entails an interpretation, as selecting from a whole set of experiences, which events and characters are worth emphasizing is in fact an act of interpretation by itself. Consequently, narratives are seldom mere mirror images of the reality experienced; instead, they are ideologically mediated by the practices, characters, and events that each territory enables. Therefore, in intercultural contact zones, each cultural practice decides which aspects should be selected for translation. In every culture, there are elements that are considered as being untranslatable into other cultures, or too vital to being exposed to the perils and doubts of a contact zone. The issue of what should or should not be translated is not limited to the selection criteria each group decides to adapt in the contact zone. Beyond active selectivity, there is something we may call passive selectivity, which consists of what has become unnamable in a given culture, due to long-term severe oppression. These are deep-seated silences, absences that cannot be fulfilled but shape the innermost practices and principles of a cultural identity (Santos 2006: 121), such as slavery, racism, religious intolerance, colonial oppression, or the subjugation of women, to name but a few.

Taking as an example again the Portuguese colonial space, it has often been represented as a mere adjuvant or antagonist in the dominant narrative of the quest for religious conversion, power, wealth, and social promotion. Contact zones thus created were never truly hybrid, as everything that did not fit into this grand narrative had very little meaning for the actors on stage. Similar processes of silencing and production of non-existence have contributed to the construction and strengthening of deep asymmetries between cultures, individuals, societies, and genders, characteristic of colonialism and patriarchy. Because, and quoting again Boaventura de Sousa Santos, cultures are monolytical only
when seen from the outside or from a distance. When seen closer or from within, it is easy to understand that cultures are constituted by many and sometimes conflicting versions of that same culture (2006: 121). More than ever, intercultural studies are to be practiced both at home and abroad, since their scope may encompass the relations between distant Eastern and Western cultures, as much as between marginal and mainstream, youth and senior, rich and poor, erudite and popular cultures, all within the same society.

As a consequence, there are narratives gradually emerging from a centuries-old silence, narratives that have been straightforward absent from history, to adapt once more the concepts developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2008: 11–43, 2006: 87–125). Emergent narratives grant a voice to subaltern groups, to all those “others” history is slowly recognizing. But the narratives of absence are also to be heard as, beyond emergent voices, or maybe through (and because of) them, it is thus possible to access otherwise silenced narratives of the everyday experience lived in the margins or under dominant social structures. These narratives generate a source of vital information that complements official history and is absent from the canon of great narratives, with their underlying discourse of power. It is then possible to understand the infinite diversity of human experience as well as the risk it faces of – due to the limits and exclusions imposed by strict isolated areas of knowledge – wasting fundamental experience, i.e., of seeing as non-existent or impossible cultural experiences that are in fact available (the “absent”) or possible (the “emergent”) (Santos 2008: 33). Here, we may recall the concept of “threshold,” close to the notion of borders and boundaries. But while borders imply obvious barriers to be challenged, thresholds emerge as subtle intellectual constructions, which – surprisingly or not – are rarely part of the academic institutional routine. They imply access rather than a dividing line and suggest a potential for making the academic territory more collaborative and intellectually powerful, through new processes of identification and interaction (Davcheva et al. 2011: 144), i.e., through new intercultural processes.

However, if deprived of a careful critical analysis, the diversity of practices, knowledge and experiences may generate a diffuse plurality of self-enclosed discourses and identities, devoid of any actual interaction, much similar to the concept of multiculturalism discussed above. Once again, intercultural translation should foster communication, generate mutual intelligibilities between different worldviews, find convergent as well as divergent points, and share alternative concepts and epistemologies, so that distant (in both space and time) cultures may ultimately understand each other. Again, and taking into account communication occurs through multiple, overlapping, and even conflicting discourses, the communication model underlying the concept of interculturalism used here is a palimpsest, a constant intertextuality with other discourses and texts from the
past and the present, that will, in turn, be used in future discourses and texts, in a permanent translation and dialogue between cultures.

3 Conclusion

There is an infinite plurality of ways of sharing cultures and reflecting critically about diversity, as globalization and its subsequent effects have become part of the everyday experience. This is why intercultural studies should circulate across disciplines, a line of thought that also implies hybridization. The condition of the contemporary world, within which the social and cultural multiplicity of the human being has become explicit and visible both in the streets and through the media, makes the phenomenon of diversity ubiquitous and necessarily open to discursive, ethnographic, anthropological, historical, and semiotic analysis, among many other possible approaches. As a consequence of such diversity, intercultural transits need a map drawn by disciplines that are seldom taken into account in a conservative approach to the notion of culture.

Interculturalism, as we understand it, is a cohesive process of culture-making, rather than a mere encounter of inherent cultural characteristics. It draws attention not to rules, structures or explanations, but to exceptions, instabilities, and misappropriations (Abdallah-Pretceille 1985). Interculturalism focuses on processes, aware that it is impossible to exhaust results and interpretations. It is deeply involved with everyday reality, changes boundary lines, negotiates conceptions, and explores transformative dynamics of communication.

While questioning definitions, we go further than Meer and Modood (2012), and, instead of contrasting interculturalism and multiculturalism in equal terms, we claim that multiculturalism, as a mere political ontology, is a subcategory of interculturalism. Interculturalism and its study go beyond contemporary circumscribed issues, toward the understanding and fostering of global communication, both past and present. Interculturalism and intercultural studies are epistemological solutions to the political misuse of multiculturalism as a utopian ontology. As a political stance, multiculturalism becomes anchored in a specific, and therefore ephemeral, context. Conversely, as an epistemology, interculturalism becomes atemporal and, if transferred into the political arena, likely to function as an effective answer to the essentialism of multiculturalism. Ultimately, if repositioned within alternative academic strategies, it may lead to understanding and reconciliation.

Resorting to metaphors to summarize better our point, interculturalism can be seen as the movement of the matter that multiculturalism is. And, as there is no static matter in the universe, interculturalism becomes a synonym for the
history of humankind, where static, culturally pure societies have never existed. Interculturalism is the grammar that connects the words of the global text and renders their juxtaposition understandable, communicative, and eventually translatable. Conversely, these words remain orderly – but meaninglessly – stacked, in parallel columns, in the dictionary of multiculturalism, which is but a survival toolkit for those lost in a strange culture.

As it becomes evident, those who are willing to join the intercultural dialogue must follow new paths across old challenges. This renewed experience implies a dynamic force among cultures and disciplines, and this is the reason why we must question and reposition the motivations, discourses, definitions, strategies, and rules of cultural interaction, in their perennial movement.

References


Bionote

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