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Havana Transcultured:

The Cultural Becoming of a Neobaroque City

When thinking of the Baroque, the figures of gold-filled and elegant seventeenth-century churches in Europe and Latin America are more likely to come to one's mind rather than a Caribbean island more renowned for sugar, cohibas, and Fidel Castro. Nonetheless, in the twentieth century the Baroque was a particularly important tool for conceptualizing Cuban culture. We know that out of Cuba came a contingent of twentieth-century writings circulating the theme of the Baroque, however the question of why the Baroque migrated into Cuban contexts can seem rather obscure. For example, why is it that Cuba, a country far less representative of the Baroque than countries such as México, Perú, and Brazil, finds such an interest in using the Baroque to appropriate theories of cultural identity? Carpentier once admitted that Cuba did not resemble the Baroque like other countries such as México or the Peruvian cities of Quito and Lima (*Tientos* 73). Nonetheless, discussions of Cuban identity and the Baroque seem to go hand in hand and in particular are addressed within the urban context of Havana. Looking into the discussions of twentieth-century

contemporary Cuban writers José Lezama Lima and Alejo Carpentier, the city of Havana seems to coincide with their ideological developments of the Baroque in Latin America. Themes inherent in the Neobaroque aesthetics such as *mestizaje* — that is the tensions of cultural and ethnical miscegenation, the mixing of both traditional and modern, indigenous and European forms into a common cultural expression — are according to writers such as Lezama Lima and Carpentier inherent in the development and architectural layout of Havana. The objectives of these writers, as this paper suggests, aims to represent Havana as a symbol in the 20th century of the iconic Neobaroque city, a demonstration of Latin American identity at its finest whereby architectural and aesthetic representations, both traditional and modernizing, Baroque and Neobaroque, nostalgic and progressive, historic and contemporary are evidenced and contingent throughout its urban development.

That both Lezama Lima and Carpentier turned to Havana to consolidate their theories on the Neobaroque is a testament to the architectural presence of the Baroque in the city. Havana itself is no stranger to the presence of Baroque structures. The city is home to various examples of Baroque architecture: the San Carlos y San Ambrosio seminary (1689); the Basilica and monastery of San Francisco de Asís, built in 1591 and altered to a Baroque style in 1730; the Palace of the Captains General (1792), and the Havana Cathedral (1730). As well, The Great Theatre of Havana (1838), adorned with elegant stone and marble statues over its arched walkways stands out as a rare Neobaroque style in the city's architecture. In particular, the Havana Cathedral—the full name being the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception—appears to be the

central Baroque icon in the Old Havana neighbourhood. What we see in the work of Lezama Lima and Carpentier is the visible and physical Baroque structures in the urban centre of Cuba being utilized as a tool to describe what they seem to imply as the less visible and ideological developments of culture—less visible only in the sense that one cannot see "culture" per se, but rather only its expressions that remain visible over time such as architecture, art, and writings. Thus Lezama Lima describes the Baroque as a "mysticism" ("La curiosidad" 303) and Carpentier describes the Baroque as a "Spirit" (*Tientos* 48) implicating the presence of a less visible and more metaphysical quality to Neobaroque culture. For this reason, the connection of the city with the Neobaroque depends on understanding culture as a transformative concept, as an expressive representation that is as fluid and malleable as vision itself, for it is here within the Neobaroque city that the visible expressions of the Baroque become the ideological representations of cultural change. One way then to contemplate the development of the Neobaroque is through what I call a "cultural refraction". Like the eye that refracts light, taking that light and transforming it into a visible image, the Neobaroque represents the transformation of culture. Rather than a reflection or mimesis of culture, the Baroque is "refracted," that is, it is transformed in a manner that creates a reformed cultural image. Both Lezama Lima and Carpentier saw Havana as the epicentre, the retina, of this cultural refraction— the place whereby culture is represented not by a state of being, but of becoming; not existent, but created; and not an original essence, but reoriginated. In the same manner that a city adapts, expands, and recreates so too does the Baroque.

Turning now to Lezama Lima, the twentieth-century Cuban contemporary to Carpentier and native to Havana, we can see a definitive connection between his interest in Havana and his formalization of the Neobaroque. It is clear that the capital city was a visible reminder of more than just the developments of Cuban culture, but of a Neobaroque culture that encompassed all of Latin America. Lezama Lima reveals that his home city of Havana in fact motivated his interest in the Baroque. In an excerpt about Havana, written on January 11, 1950 and published in the compilation of short dictations *Revelaciones de mi fiel Habana* (2010), Lezama Lima describes the capital city to be an eclectic, almost living entity that is overflowing with Baroque characteristics. He portrays Havana as representing a "nostalgia" of the tower of Babel, a metaphor for the dispersion of its urban developments and chaotic nature. There is a clear similarity seen in the metaphors that Lezama Lima uses to describe the environment of Havana in this excerpt written in 1950 and those he uses to describe the Baroque in his essay "La curiosidad barroca," published seven years later.¹ The metaphors are almost identical: Lezama Lima describes Havana as a forest and the Baroque as a truly American forest (325); Havana is the heart of the sea, and likewise there is a "sea dyed with an ink that is equally baroque" (325); Havana develops like a swell of immense and prideful waves of water" (321) and similarly the Baroque appears like an unshakeable succession of waves (321); Havana is in a state of cold chaos, and similarly there is a "cold baroque" (302); and the Baroque

¹ For all metaphors on Havana I refer to here, see Carlos Espinosa Domínguez' entry LXXII in *Revelaciones de mi fiel Habana*, 132. The English translations I have given here for each metaphor and with other citations throughout the paper are my own. Throughout this paper I have represented my translations by placing "my trans." at the end of the translated quotations. All given translations are from the original Spanish texts to English.

elements of Havana "breathe within a drawn out mystery" (321) while Lezama Lima titles his essay "La curiosidad barroca." Furthermore, Lezama Lima describes the expansion of Havana to be delayed by its labyrinths which gives an immediate reference to Jorge Luis Borges' labyrinth quality of the Baroque. Lezama Lima, in the heart of a poet, appears obsessed with detail, hence his adamance on using metaphors to describe the connections between Havana and the Baroque. He is not less inspired by the Baroque detail of the Havana Cathedral. As he implies later in "La curiosidad barroca," the Baroque layout of the Cathedral is a sight of attraction for Havana citizens: "What *habanero* ... has never stopped, before that majestic gesture, truly cardenal, made of stone in fugal form, within a small, smiling, friendly balcony opened half way between the extended pride of the stonework!" (my trans. 321). All in all, we find the Cuban capital acting as a foundation for much of Lezama Lima's metaphorical descriptions of the Baroque. For Lezama Lima Havana is therefore considered to be the ideal example of the urban Baroque, a city that is metaphorically and historically overflowing with Baroque symbolism.

If Lezama Lima saw the attention of Habaneros centered on the stonework in the Baroque architecture of Havana, then it is Carpentier who draws our attention to the work of concrete. In his essay "Conciencia e identidad de América"² Carpentier distinguishes between the European and American Baroque according to the materials of stone and concrete whereby the urban development of both the Latin American city and its population is

² Found in *La novela latinoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo y otros ensayos*, 79-87.

representative of a "rhythm" of concrete that implies a fluidity of urban development and modernization.³ Carpentier's metaphor for urban development realized in the "rhythm" of concrete being poured into these new world Baroque cities finds particular significance in an earlier essay of his titled "La ciudad de las columnas" (1967) where he discusses in greater detail the dispersion of cement columns throughout Havana. Describing Havana as the "city of shadows," Carpentier portrays the urban development of the city to be characterized by its shaded walkways supported by series of columns.

Metaphorically he depicts the columns as a profusion of structures that resembles the trees of a jungle.⁴ Like a jungle and its constant existence of its natural habitat throughout history, the "constancy" of the city's columns becomes one of the attributes of Havana,—a city described as a "style without a style" (41) — distinguishing it from other cities in Latin America. The image of the jungle and the city in Carpentier's works become the defining metaphors for the dialectic of tradition and modernity, the indigenous and the American, and the wilderness and urbanity. At the end of his essay, Carpentier refers to the sequences of *colonnades* in Havana to bring to mind the image of "potential jungles" (my trans. 48) that echoes — and Carpentier quotes here — the phrase "le temple où de vivants piliers" of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (48).

³ Carpentier, comparing European and American development writes: "Mientras el hombre de Europa nacía, crecía, maduraba, entre piedras seculares, edificaciones viejas, apenas acrecidas o anacronizadas por alguna tímida innovación arquitectónica, el latinoamericano nacido en los albores de este siglo de prodigiosos inventos, mutaciones, revoluciones, abría los ojos en el ámbito de ciudades que, casi totalmente inmovilizadas desde los siglos XVII o XVIII, con un lentísimo aumento de población, empezaban a agigantarse, a extenderse, a alargarse, a elevarse, al ritmo de las mezcladoras de concreto" (*La novela* 79).

⁴ Carpentier writes: "una de las más singulares constantes del estilo habanero: la increíble profusión de columnas, en una ciudad que es emporio de columnas, selva de columnas, columnata infinita, última urbe en tener columnas en tal demasia" (*Tientos* 42).

Havana's columns in the eyes of Carpentier are less the dull forms of hardened cement, but rather seem to represent the metaphorical depiction of Baudelaire's "living pillars" that resemble the living ambience of trees and foliage found in a jungle. This of course echoes the former novel of Carpentier *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) that is based primarily in the amazon jungles of Venezuela. Here the protagonist of the story describes the jungle as a "vast vegetal country with very few doors" (my trans. 303) which Carpentier juxtaposes in the same novel with the allusion to Noah's Arc — a large structure with a single entrance; a prodigious world with selected access. That Carpentier opts to use the metaphor of a jungle to describe Havana cloaks the city under a dialectic of tradition (the jungle) and modernity (urbanity) while likewise alluding to the vast and yet exclusive nature of its Neobaroque environment. Havana, an urban-like jungle, can be thought of as a Baroque arc that carried a select allotment of history into a new era. Like God who restarted the history of mankind with Noah, Havana becomes the location for the reorigination of the Baroque— a modern beginning founded on a traditional past.

Reorigination implies that the Neobaroque was used as a form of cultural renovation in the twentieth century that sought to differentiate Latin American culture from European modernization. In other words, Cuban culture began to reflect back on Latin American origins in order to appropriate a post-colonial identity in the face of a colonial past. As I mentioned earlier, what occurred here in the twentieth century was a cultural refraction, a formation of a new cultural image translated from a previous "light" of history. Every refraction requires a focal point, which in the case of the Neobaroque was the urban centres. The city

then becomes the destination for Latin America's reoriginated expression. In her essay, "'The Future is Entirely Fabulous': The Baroque Genealogy of Latin America's Modernity" Monika Kaup uses the concept of reorigination to explain the Baroque as a vehicle for post-colonial expression:

How does [the Baroque], a term borrowed from European art history help one understand what the colonized were or are doing? One answer is the notion of reorigination: expressive forms do not continue to have the social meaning they had at their origins; social and discursive formations are subject to never-ending flows of appropriation, rearticulation, hegemonic co-optation, and popular subversion. (232)

Lezama Lima's collection of essays titled *La expresión americana* exemplifies the concept of reorigination. Here, he develops theories of cultural expression from the perspective of Latin America culture and history. The American (historical) Baroque is revealed as a manner of expression that connects cultural and historical roots of Latin America; a mosaic of indigenous, African, and European forms are pieced together by the Cuban author writing in the post-colonial present. It is also here that Lezama Lima endows the project of the Baroque to be realized in the development of the city, or as he states, the Baroque "represents a triumph of the city" (my trans. 303). Zamora and Kaup connect the concept of reorigination to metropolitan environments:

The growing interest in the historical Baroque was motivated by the need to define local cultures against metropolitan norms. The recodification—we

might even say the *reorigination* — of the New World Baroque provided a way to differentiate Latin American forms from European cultural models without denying Europe's role in creating Latin American cultural realities. (Italics in original 8)

The urban environment of the city becomes this central "cultural reality" of Latin America representing the place that unifies both European and Latin American cultural products. As Antonio Maravall confirms, "if the Baroque is an urban culture, it is, above all, a culture of the great city" (my trans. 246). The key here is to understand the dynamic between location and cultural expression. Culture is located with the populous, so are the people located in the city. Havana then becomes the location of the people and therefore the location of culture.

The tendency of the Neobaroque to fuse past and present, traditional and modern, and American and European forms is representative of a cultural reality that is likewise both inclusive and diverse in nature. The term *mestizaje* therefore has been useful to parallel the diversity of mixed cultures in Latin America with the diversity of Neobaroque artwork. *Mestizaje*, the racial and cultural miscegenation throughout history, is foundational for the reorigination of Cuban culture in the twentieth-century, supporting an environment conscientious of its European past while being focused on its post-colonial present. In the case of Cuba, *mestizaje* has a lot to do with the cultural diversity of the Cuban people and the historical expression that is realized in the urbanization of Havana. As Susanna Regazzoni explains, Cuba is a country that

represents a world "characterized by diversity and ethnical, linguistic, religious, and social amalgamation, all factors that likewise share in a dispersive and ambiguous identity" (my trans. 12). This dispersed and ambiguous identity is the key factor that paves the way for Baroque integration in Cuban culture. Diversity, dispersion, ambiguity— such factors become summarized in the term *mestizaje*.

In short, we may understand *mestizaje* as the mixture of racial and cultural categories unified under a common identity. According to Cecile Leclercq, the objective of *mestizaje* holds a significant value in the establishment and reaffirmation of Latin American identity. She describes the objective of *mestizaje* as "the rehabilitation and valorization of diverse cultural components of the subcontinent and above all the racial miscegenation that gave way to the entrance of Latin American nations through a universal history and ended with their exclusion" (my trans. 87). The last point implied by Leclercq here, concerning the end of exclusion, is fundamental to the meaning of *mestizaje* – it is the progress from exclusivity towards inclusivity; division to union. In particular, this represents the nineteenth-century *mestizo* project of José Martí as discussed in his work *Nuestra América* (1891). Martí, fighting for Cuba's independence from Spain, saw the island's future determined by the need to fuse together the vast racial distinctions of the country that had been put under prejudice through years of colonial tensions and slavery. Understanding that Cuba — a country flourishing with racial differences (*criollos*, *mestizos*, *mulattos*, Afro-Cubans) — required national unification in order to find independence from Spain, Martí then sought to develop an ideology in which

national liberty avoided categories of differentiation found in Cuba's racial diversity. Therefore, for Martí there were no longer races, there were only Cubans; no longer slavery (politically or ethnically), only freedom. As exhorted in *Nuestra América*, race for Martí becomes non-existent in the perspective of American universality: "There is no hatred of races, because there is no race ... the soul emanates, equal and eternal, of the diverse forms and colours of bodies. He that fosters and propogates opposition and the hatred of races sins against humanity" (my trans. 39). The renowned twentieth-century critic on Cuban culture, Fernando Ortiz, similarly reflects on Martí's anti-racial ideology in his essay "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad." Here, Ortiz uses Martí's ideology to help define Cuban identity under a term that he coins as *la cubanidad*. Ortiz writes: "*Cubanidad* is not spawned; there is no Cuban race. Neither is there any such thing as a pure race ... The *cubanidad* of an individual is not found in one's blood, nor in paper or one's home. *Cubanidad* is primarily the peculiar quality of a culture, that of Cuba" (my trans. 77). Ortiz continues by creating a metaphor of *cubanidad* by representing Cuba and its mixed races to be like a soup concoction called *ajiaco*. As Ortiz describes, Cuba being an *ajiaco* implies that "its people are not that of a cooked stew, but rather that of a consistent braising. Since the awakening of its history until the current passing of time, there has always existed within Cuba's cooking pot a consistent replenishment of races, fruits and oxogenous meats, an incessant outpouring of heterogeneous substances" (my trans. 81). For Ortiz, the racial and cultural distinctions of Cuba are blended and "cooked" into a single element, *el ajiaco*, saturating the individual elements together to form a unified taste of *cubanidad*. *Ajiaco*

becomes Ortiz's metaphor of Cuban *mestizaje*: "The *mestizaje* of kitchens, *mestizaje* of races, *mestizaje* of cultures; the thick broth of civilization that boils over in the fire of the Caribbean" (my trans. 81). *Mestizaje* becomes as integrative within Baroque forms as it is within the Cuban people, thus becoming the connecting principle between Cuban culture and the Baroque.

The concept of *mestizaje* finds relevancy with Baroque forms in the process I have termed cultural refraction. The cultural identifier of *mestizaje* is "refracted" in a manner that transforms it into both a cultural and artistic category. Ideology thus becomes form, culture becomes art, hybridity becomes expression. According to Zamora and Kaup "[t]he capacity of the Baroque to overarch contradictions and include oppositions has made it particularly useful for theorizing cultural difference, as well as for celebrating the hybridity of Latin American cultural products" (8). A cultural refraction is then paralleled in the city, which becomes the urban playground of such oppositions. Architecture, in particular, can be seen as the tool of *mestizaje* in the city. Lezama Lima best indicates this in "La curiosidad barroca" when he describes the art of the eighteenth-century Quechua Indian sculptor José Kondori to represent "the synthesis of both the Spanish and the Indian" and the art of African-Brazilian architect Antônio Francisco Lisboa, known as Aleijadinho as "the union of the great Hispanic form with African cultures (my trans. 324). The works of these architects are then represented as a manner to "synthesize" and "unify" cultural diversity— Spanish with Indian, Hispanic with African. *Mestizaje* is thus represented in the refracted diversity of Baroque forms.

A century earlier than the writings of Lezama Lima, Martí similarly observed that cultural diversity could be represented through architecture. In his essay "La historia del hombre, contada por sus casas" Martí analyzes human nature from a historical perspective beginning with the Palaeolithic world and ending in the modern world. He uses the history of diverse architectural styles found in houses throughout the Americas to represent the ethnic diversity — the *mestizaje* — of Latin America.⁵ Therefore, in the same way for which the cities of Latin America are identified by their diverse architectural styles, so too is Latin American identity defined by the diversity of its people. Continuing with his essay on the history of humanity, Martí writes: "what appears new in the cities is not the manner of constructing houses, but that in every city there are Moorish, Greek, Gothic, Byzantine, and Japanese houses, as if a time of happiness had begun where men of all types treated each other as friends and joined together" (my trans. 77). Martí's connection with the variety of Latin American cultures and the variety of architectural styles found in Latin American houses proves to be an early example of the theorization of *mestizaje* within urban contexts. Havana in particular is a city with architectural styles that proves as eclectic and diverse as its people. Carpentier uses the diversity of columns in Havana to represent the Cuban *mestizaje* in a similar manner that Martí used the diversity of house styles. The diverse representation of columns throughout the city is described as the Baroque character of Cuba (its *barroquismo*): "And like all *mestizaje* that engenders a *barroquismo* through the process of symbiosis,

⁵ Essay found in *La Edad de Oro y otros relatos*.

addition, and mixture, the Cuban *barroquismo* consists in accumulating, collecting, and multiplying columns and colonnades in the excessive representations of doric, corinthian, ionic, and composite" (my trans. *Tientos* 48). Carpentier's theory of columns can be thought of as a metaphor for cultural symbiosis— it is a process of inscribing cultural difference within a similar urbanized space. César Augusto Salgado summarizes this well in his essay "Hybridity in New World Baroque Theory" by explaining that "New World baroque writers thus theorized the hybrid as a hidden inscription of difference within the fictional sameness of official culture, as rebellious graffiti camouflaged in the forest of baroque symbols" (318). In a sense, the diverse styles of columns in Havana thus become Havana's Baroque "graffiti."

I have up until now discussed the Neobaroque in a conceptual manner that labels Latin American culture as a category of 'becoming,' that is, as a form of identity that is liable to change depending on the time and location of its existence. The Neobaroque, as a term, connects cultural expressions such as art with cultural identities such as *mestizaje*. Terms such as reorigination and cultural refraction implicate a value of history inscribed into a modern environment and claims a status of diversity and multiformity. The question that remains then is how the Neobaroque is realized? Along with this question we may ask how *mestizaje* becomes, what Antonio Cornejo Polar describes to be, "the most powerful and widespread conceptual device with which Latin America has interpreted itself" (116)? The answer seems to lie in what Fernando Ortiz describes as a process of transculturation. The term transculturation is a neologism originally used by Ortiz in his anthropological study on Cuban

culture, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1983). Ortiz defines transculturation as: "the multifaceted phenomena that originated in Cuba due to the vastly complex cultural transmutations, verified here, without knowing the underlying impossibilities of understanding the evolution of the Cuban people, as well as the economic, institutional, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, and other aspects of its life" (my trans. 255). Ortiz then understands Cuba's history to be an evolutionary process described as a "rhythm" that structurally transforms culture at various stages (255). The first stage is represented as a shift from the indigenous Palaeolithic to the Neolithic whose cultures eventually disappear due to their inability to survive the forceful modernizations of incipient Castilian culture. Subsequently, a transculturation occurred with the incessant arrival of white immigrants, primarily Spanish, and yet another transculturation with the influx of diverse cultures from Africa and Asia. These particular events of transculturation therefore come to represent the influencing stages of Cuba's entrance into modernity, which is always followed by the collision of cultures differentiating between either traditional or modern perspectives. Transculturation therefore depends on the adaptive receptivity of traditional cultures, that is, their ability to adapt within the modernizing circumstances. However, it is a process that implies more than merely acculturation, since it requires less of a "fitting into" a new cultural context, and more of a "renovation" of the context itself. For this reason, Ortiz chooses the word transculturation to represent this process. He sees a need to correct terminological inaccuracy represented by the word "acculturation." Rather, Ortiz describes the process of transculturation as a

collection of three phases: "deculturation," or the deconstruction of the culture of origin; "acculturation," or the procurement of cultural elements by another culture; and "neoculturation," or the synthetic operation of traditional and modern elements of culture. Gustavo Pérez Firmat summarizes Ortiz's processes explaining that, "in the case of the black population of Cuba, deculturation involves the extinction of African culture as a signifying totality; acculturation involves the acquisition of fragments of the white man's culture; and neoculturation is the synthesis of the African with the European" (31). The Neobaroque thus becomes integrated into twentieth-century Cuban culture, working together to "deculture", "acculture", and neoculture" Cuba in a way in which it may survive between the modernizations that press it forward and the nostalgia of history that calls it back.

Cuba's transculturation set in motion a cultural dynamism of *mestizaje* in the country and Havana is by far the key location of its development. Returning to Carpentier's essay "La ciudad de las columnas" we can see that he saw both the city and the Baroque to be unified in the unique urban development of Havana. Using the terms of Zamora and Kaup, Carpentier sees the proliferating columns of Cuba to represent the qualities of "accumulation and accommodation" (242) inherent in the Baroque. The idea is that as Cuba is "trans-cultured," so too is the Baroque style, we may say, "trans-styled". Therefore both cultural identity and aesthetic style are transformed side by side, the formal structure of art reflecting the sociological structure of culture. The Argentinian architect Francisco Ángel Guido's redefinition of the Greek caryatids is a good example of this. Whereas the Greek caryatids represents female structures that act as

architectural supports that often take the place of a column or a pillar, there exists a more indigenous style of such forms described by Guido as *indiatides*. In "La curiosidad barroca" Lezama Lima uses Guido's description of *indiatides* as a way to demonstrate the insertion of indigenous style into an originally European framework. Lezama Lima references the work of the Quechua Indian sculptor José Kondori, known as the Indio Kondorí, who created similar structures of *indiatides* on the façade of the San Lorenzo de Carangas Church in Potosí, Bolivia. Here, rather than in the European form of sculpted women, the columns form the image of Indian princesses— a transformation from European caryatids to Latin American *indiatides*. The insertion of indigenous symbols into European architecture therefore echoes the plight of transculturation in Latin American culture whereby culture was accumulating and accommodating different styles, expressions, and forms within its Latin American context.

Like the example of the sixteenth-century *indiatides*, Baroque forms in Latin America followed similar patterns of cultural integration. Therefore, the proliferation of the columns in Havana that Carpentier describes likewise reflects the proliferation of the city's cultural diversity. As Zamora and Kaup clarify, the Baroque is seen as "*originative, generative, transformative, growing out of cultural collisions, permutations, and creative recyclings*" (242; Italics in original). As Zamora and Kaup indicate here, the Baroque 'grows out of culture.' We may therefore say that in the context of Latin America, the Neobaroque grows out of the culture of the city, and similarly in the context of Cuba, the Neobaroque thus grows out of the culture of Havana. In this way Havana

becomes the urbanized center of cultural proliferation— diverse, *mestizo*, trans-cultured, and transformative.

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