Creolization and Its Discontents

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Abstract
In the past two decades, analogies drawn from supposedly Caribbean processes of creolization have begun to command increasing interest in anthropology. Examining historical as well as contemporary social uses of this terminology in its region of origin, as well as linguistic, sociocultural, and archaeological extrapolations from such usages, this review argues that although, as an analytical metaphor, “creolization” may appear to remedy certain deficits in long-standing anthropological agendas, the current unreflective use of it is neither defensible on empirical grounds nor theoretically well advised. Yet while this review argues against further uncritical extensions of such metaphoric, it analyzes their current proliferation as a social phenomenon worthy of anthropological analysis in its own right.
INTRODUCTION

Once exclusively part of the vocabulary of Caribbean and Latin American regionalists or linguists specializing in language contact, terms such as “creole” and “creolization” have recently experienced a remarkable diffusion into all kinds of discourses on “culture,” local or global. Although this trend has been observable in other disciplines as well (most notably literary criticism, but also history1), as far as anthropology is concerned, the attractiveness of deploying generalized conceptions built on such terminology seems fairly obvious. Dovetailing with a variety of late-twentieth-century projects aiming to dismantle prior localizing strategies and ethnographic objectifications, the proliferation of concepts of “creolization” (along with related notions of “hybridity,” “syncretism,” and “mestizaje”)2 appeared to offer a theoretical opening toward a critique of certain foundational fictions of our discipline, while allowing for a characterization of presumably global “postmodern” conditions and sensibilities: As processes of globalization unravel what we previously imagined as a world of pelagic cultures and identities, and dissolve hitherto seemingly non-negotiable differences into intersystemic continua of hybrid forms and states of being, some of us are discovering that the postmodern “conditio humana” resembles what has been the “conditio Caribbeana” since at least the sixteenth century (Mintz 1996, Trouillot 1998).3 Thus, supposedly “creole” phenomena have been sighted in as different ethnographic and historical contexts as, for example, modern South India (Caplan 1995), the Solomon Islands (Jourdan 1996), and Stockholm’s Botkyrka quarter (Hannerz 1996, pp. 150–59), among female immigrant entrepreneurs in Milan (Lunghi 2003), in the development of sport in Singapore (Horton 2001) as well as in that country’s food industry (Davis 2003), during Catholic masses in Ilhadan (Salamone 1991), among nineteenth-century U.S. Mormons (Rodseth & Olsen 2000), in Roman Gaul (Webster 2001), in aboriginal southern Australia (Birmingham 2000), and in late-eighteenth-century Haida society (Mullins & Paynter 2000), lending ostensibly credence to Hannerz’s (1987) assertion that the world is (or perhaps has always been) “in creolization.”4

Of course, the portent of such discoveries would seem to depend on what semantic work predicates such as “creole,” “creolized,” or “in creolization” are expected to perform. Are they meant to index a distinct class or group of objectively occurring phenomena that can be unambiguously distinguished from other “noncreole,” “uncreolized,” or “creolizing” ones on the basis of specifiable criteria (Gundaker 2000, Khan 2001)? Or are we dealing with the products of a perspectival shift generative of a “now you


3This became strikingly clear when, in 2002, the international art event Documenta 11 featured as one of its Platform a workshop on “Créolité et Creolization” held in St. Lucia (Enwezor et al. 2003). The Web is saturated with entries for “creolization”: A Google search will generate some 26,000 instant hits (as of December 2004). There one can find such gems as a serious debate about whether liberal political philosophy is a “moral piddlin” or on its way to full-blown “creolization.” (http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-yearbook/92/docs/Bull.HTM)

4Perhaps one of the most curious applications of the term known to me can be found in a recent festschrift for Hannerz, in which the editors come close to vaunting that Hannerz himself is a creole phenomenon (Stade & Dahl 2003).

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see it, now you don't" effect that reflects the specificity of changing form of awareness on our part, rather than the specificity of facts that have simply come under novel descriptions (Strathern 1992; Parkin 1993; Friedman 1994; Maurer 1997, 2002; compare Sahlins 1993, 1999)? Given the generally undertheorized use of creolization terminology, it is perhaps unsurprising that both views have been articulated. Although most authors favoring such language tend to fall toward one or the other end of a spectrum of analytical intensionalities, it may be fair to say that the deployment of this terminology is supposed to both generate novel analytical insights about a world we have long been accustomed to consider in other terms (think of Roman Gaul or the Mormons) and render more adequate descriptions of substantially "new" cultural configurations and developments than previous anthropological discursive conventions might have produced (think of Nigerians or Swedes watching American TV soaps).

In either case, however, current creolization discourse in anthropology recurs to a language rooted in highly specific geohistorical as well as intellectual contexts. It extrapolates localized and historically situated social usages (including more restricted scholarly abstractions thereof) and elevates them to the status of generalized descriptive or analytical instruments. Different from terms such as "hybrid" or "syncretic" (but not "mestizo/a"!), there are people for whom the term creole has served as an immediately significant predicate (whether imposed or self-selected) of selfhood and social practice for close to half a millennium. People and practices so named were, and often still are, found in the core areas of European colonial overseas expansion, and so, at least arguably, in those regions which historically functioned as the cradle of global capitalist modernity (James 1963 [1939]; Williams 1944; Mintz 1971a, 1974, 1985, 1996; Gilroy 1993; Blackburn 1997)—a point to which I return below. A list of localities where people, at one time or another, have been called "creole" (or called themselves thus) would have to include not just the Antilles and much of Latin America, but also parts of the southeastern United States (and Alaska), several island groups off the Atlantic and Pacific coast of Africa, a number of mainland regions on that continent (including Sierra Leone, Equatorial Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique), and a few pockets in the former Portuguese and Dutch colonial spheres in southeast Asia. Yet the common point of reference in the contemporary literature tends to be the post-Columbian Caribbean. When Clifford (1988, p. 173) thus proposed—in what appears now to be one of the founding texts for contemporary "creolization" discourse—that "we are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagoes," he implied that "our" current world (and we should ask, who is this "we"?) has come to share important qualities or characteristics with the one(s) people in the Caribbean inhabit. Although Clifford did not explicitly say so, given the subsequent outpouring of literature coming to essentially similar conclusions, one might argue that what "we" now share with the "Caribbeans" is a common "creoleness"—whatever that may be taken to mean.

**A META-ARCHIPELAGO?**

As a result, the Caribbean region has seen a surprising transformation in relation to changing anthropological structures of interest: From a long-neglected (Mintz 1970, 1971a, 1977), seemingly anomalous (Trouillot 1992) net-importer of metropolitan theory (Appadurai 1986, 1988; Fardon 1991) and a distinctly low-prestige zone of anthropological inquiry (Abu-Lughod 1989) that, as late
as the early 1990s, had seemed to have been all but abandoned to developmental sociology and political science (Carnegie 1992), the Caribbean has mutated into a prime object of anthropological cathexis, a region that, for various and often unstated reasons, is now understood as an “open frontier” (Trouillot 1992) for an anthropology promising to deliver timely and relevant forms of “cultural criticism” as well as impulses for intradisciplinary theoretical renewal (Slocum & Thomas 2003). If the societies and cultures of the Caribbean never quite fit the “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991) so crucial for the development of anthropology’s disciplinary identity—if they were never quite “other” enough, but rather perceived as odd and largely uninteresting “hybrid” formations, then it should not come as much of a surprise that once we began to abandon the strategies of epistemic purification that had once underwritten our intellectual practice (Latour 1993; compare Maurer 1997, Palmié 2002) their former “hybrid” irrelevance to the discipline’s central concerns instantly transformed as well. Once regarded as insufficiently differentiated from the “West” to warrant ethnographic attention, just such attention to the “creolized” cultures of the Caribbean now seem to be warranted, not because these cultures have become any more different from ours in the meantime, but because we feel ours are becoming increasingly similar to theirs: “creolized, creolizing” as Hannerz (1988) put it in reference to the United States, a densely rhizomatic mangrove of potentialities (Bernabé et al. 1989, Glissant 1989) that irreversibly dissolves all rooted certainties into contingent routes toward indeterminate cultural futures (Clifford 1997).

At least in the view of most advocates of Caribbean analogies (but see Maurer 1997), we are now witnessing the birth of a world more adequately rendered by an ethnographic “poetics of relation,” an analytics of “transversality” (Glissant 1997) and “traveling theory” more generally (Clifford 1997), than by those ideas of discretely distributed human cultural difference, which our discipline iron-
the moral and political dilemma we created for ourselves when we began to arbitrate the authenticity or “inventedness” of others’ cultures and pasts. Holding out the promise of “postauthentic pluralism” (Thomas 1996)—or, alternatively—that of “postplural” authenticity (Strathern 1992), at the current post-millenarian juncture things “Caribbean” and “creole” are, or so it seems, “good to think” for an anthropology questioning some of its own disciplinary foundations.

The result is not just that Caribbean creoleness is fast approaching the status of a “native category” among European and North American academics [indeed, Howes (1996) already speaks of a “creolization paradigm”]. Rather, as Sheller (2003) charges, what may be at work here could well consist in “theoretical piracy on the high seas of global culture” (p. 188). In her view, a whole range of “contemporary claims to mobility, hybridity, and creative cultural adaptation draw on Caribbean antecedents of ‘creolization’ [that are] borrowed via the work of Caribbean diaspora theorists, but gutted of many of the original connotations of the term” through metaphorical overextension to inappropriate conceptual domains and analytical contexts. Of course, the claim that some of the characteristics of peripheral societies and cultures, which once anticipated important features of modernity in the core (Mintz 1985, 1996), may also prefigure the symptomatology of modernity’s global denouement is intriguing, although obviously not empirically debatable. Yet what clearly is emerging in contemporary anthropological creolization discourse is a system of interactive metaphors [in Black’s (1962) sense, with all its implications of unforeseeable performativity and semantic hybridization] —one that allows for near unlimited, and in fact quite promis-

cuous, semantic transfer not just between “Caribbeanness” and “creoleness” (which increasingly are being treated as coextensive in the nonregionalist literature), but also between those predicates and others presumed to apply to the global “postmodern condition,” such that an objectified hyperfluid and -flexible “Caribbean” indeed comes to function as the “meta-archipelago” (Benitez Rojo 1992) for “our urban archipelagos” where, in the eyes of some of our colleagues, the identification of all that seems to melt in the air is now the hallmark of epistemological solidity.

More concretely, the reasoning behind such metropolitan tropological uptake from this particular peripheral world would seem to go somewhat like this: Once (say, 30 years ago) phenomena (people and/or cultures) exhibiting essential quality \(x\) (“creoleness”) were thought to exist only in region \(y\) (the Caribbean). Now we have either (a) changed our minds and regard their occurrence in \(y\) as merely an instance of a hitherto-overlooked class of phenomena that all exhibit quality \(x\) (and can so be identified irrespective of space and time, e.g., in the archaeological record, or contemporary Milan) or (b) come to realize that the distribution of individual cases of phenomena characterized by \(x\) is so steadily approaching ubiquity that \(x\) has increasingly become essential (or at least typologically salient) to a historically specific group of phenomena—e.g., those forming part of what Hannerz (1996) calls the “global cultural ecumene” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (compare Appadurai 1996, but see also Friedman 1995, Mintz 1996 and Cooper 2001). Irrespective, however, of the tint of logical irreconcilability exposed by formulating matters this way,\(^8\) the immediately salient question is not only

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\(^7\)We should be clear in regard to what is being exported from the Caribbean: We are not dealing with full-fledged sets of explicit models—as in the well-known case where attempts to apply African kinship models to Melanesia not only did not deliver any cargo empirically, but irreversibly damaged lineage theory itself (compare Barnes 1962, Karp 1978). Rather, we are facing a far more amorphous cont-

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\(^8\)It might now be considered pedantic to note that membership in classes composed of instances implies something logically very different than belonging to groups composed of historical particulars. Boas (e.g., 1966 [1887], pp. 639–47) was still well aware that one cannot quite have it both ways and remain argumentatively consistent.
whether the recent anthropological creolization literature identifies a panhuman potentiality, or the (somehow comparable) local outcomes of a set of historically specific processes. The question is, instead, what has all or any of this to do with the Caribbean? Have we simply (re)invented the region under the sign of “creolization” (Khan 2001)? And if not, how (if at all) might the regionalist literature support either claim [for both claims have, in effect, been made (compare, for example, Drummond 1980, Bernabé et al. 1989 or Glissant 1989, 1997 on universality with Williams 1991, Mintz 1996, or Price & Price 1997, Price 2001, and Hall 2003a,b on historical specificity)]. What then does the “creoleness” of the Caribbean consist in, and how has it been named and conceptualized?

REGIONALIST PERSPECTIVES: INDIGENIZATION, NOSTRIFICATION, ALTERITY, EXCLUSION

Two distinct, although historically interrelated, sources spring to mind here: first, the rich, but contradictory body of documented historical and contemporary usages on which anthropologists and historians working on the region initially performed largely untheorized extrapolations to categorize their data (e.g., Gillin 1947, 1949; Tschopik 1948; Simmons 1955; Pearse 1956; Adams 1959; Crowley 1960; Smith 1965; Goveia 1965 or even Brathwaite 1971); and second, an important body of theory linguists have, since at least the 1950s, erected on the “protolinguistic” observations of speech patterns prevalent in the region and elaborated on in a variety of equally diverse and often contradictory ways (see below). What seems to link them most closely is a sense of novelty and exceptionality, but one that, in both cases, was relational and contrastive rather than absolute. Right from the beginning, “the creole” was a figure on someone else’s—oftentimes quite alien—conceptual ground. In the first instance, we thus see terms such as “criollo” emerging in the context of a metropolitan folk sociology within decades of the onset of Iberian colonization of the Americas: Although their etymology continues to be the subject of lively debates, their first appearance in the documentary record tends to be traced to the early Spanish and Portuguese Atlantic. By the second half of the sixteenth century such terms began to designate fairly consistently the modifications that Old World life forms (i.e., people, plants, and animals, probably in that order) were perceived to undergo upon becoming “native” to the Americas, thus highlighting a certain sense of surprise at the plasticity of biotic and social forms (Boyd-Bowman 1971, Bacigalupo 1981, Brading 1991, Alberro 1992, Allen 1998, Cañizares Esguerra 1999, Schwartz & Salomon 1999, Oscar Acevedo 1999, Chaplin 2007, Stewart 2007, Palmié 2007). Although polemically charged from its inception, and burdened with speculations about climatic, astrological, or other environmental influences, for example, on the processes of differentiation between Old World populations and their New World progeny, such terminology tended more often to evoke its own antitheses (i.e., the uncreole Indian or metropolitan European) than to indicate specific properties on the part of people so qualified. What it certainly did not imply were notions of explicitly racial or ethnic difference and least of all any form of hybridity or mixedness—at least not before such
terminology was snatched up by the rhetoric of Latin American liberators in search of post-colonial nations (Palmie 2007) or brought into conjunction with rigidly corporative (e.g., North American) ideologies of racial hypodescent (e.g., Domínguez 1986).11 What early usages of “criollo” tend to connote is a sense of alterity from the metropolitan view and of indigenization or nostrification from that of self-identified peripherals; and on a vernacular level the term continues to hold such meaning to this day.12 This is also the sense that such terminology continued to carry when diffusing, by the second half of the seventeenth century, into British (but not British North American) English and French as a referent to American-born Europeans and Africans and, at times, those real or imputed peculiarities that set both apart from first-generation migrants from the metropolis or newly imported slaves (Stein 1998, Chaudenson 2001, Chaplin 2007, Stewart 2007).

Here we note an important shift in local historical semantics, which current anthropological creolization discourse consistently tends to disregard or blur. By the end of the eighteenth century, and especially upon the founding of the first Latin American nation-states in the early nineteenth century, the semantic cargo transported by the term criollo in continental American Spanish began to diverge dramatically from the older meanings it continued to hold in Spain’s remaining Caribbean colonies, as well as those of other European nations. In the former case, it now begins to take on the ideological weight of designating the citizenship requirements of— theoretically as of yet unimaginable—nations composed of racially heterogeneous populations (a conundrum prevented in the United States by categorical exclusion of nonwhites from the national project). Especially in situations involving large and still corporately organized Native American communities, it begins to perform the exclusionary work once discharged by Spanish colonial estate-based legal disqualifications, although now in the service of the ostensibly egalitarian liberal ideologies of indigenized postcolonial elites of allogenic origin. Often but not always yoked to conceptions of a “mestizo nation” developed in reaction to the rise of biologic racism in nineteenth-century Europe and North America, by the twentieth century, Latin American “criollismo” mutated into an “all inclusive ideology of exclusion” (Stutzman 1981), serving to demarcate supposedly “uncreole” collective identities defined by performative failure apposite locally varying ideals of prescriptive hybrid homogeneity and entailing severe restrictions of resource access, civic status, and political empowerment for those who whether by choice or default remain “pure,” and so “outside the nation” (Stutzman 1981; Knight 1990; Casimir 1992; Klor de Alva 1995; Smith 1995; Hale 1996, 1999, Martínez-Echázabal 1998; de la Cadena 2000; Sabato 2001; Palmie 2007a).

Casimir (1992) sees such postcolonial ideological elaboration of concepts of “creoledom” as characteristic of those regions of mainland Ibero-America and the Hispanic Caribbean that became incorporated into the capitalist world system not just in the form of socially essentially unviable peripheral production sites based on the creative destruction
of coerced plantation labor (as was the case of much of the Caribbean), but that also functioned both as settler and exploitation colonies until the end of the colonial period and so generated early and lasting senses of local identity among indigenized migrant populations (compare Mintz 1971a,b; Klor de Alva 1995). Contrariwise, in the case of the non-Iberian Caribbean, Casimir (1992) suggests that the qualifier “creole” mainly designated a structural position: namely that of the island-born slave sufficiently socialized into the violent extractive process “of a societal project lacking any local base” and productive only of forms of social cohesion in “those social spaces which did not adversely affect the colonial exploitation system” (p. 44) (compare Smith 1965, Mintz & Price 1992, Palmié 1993). To be sure, it was in precisely such marginal social spaces that enslaved Africans transformed themselves from mere collectivities of deracinated individuals into viable communities integrated by cultural forms that, although selectively drawing on Old World resources, were nevertheless wholly the products of deracinated individuals into viable communities integrated by cultural forms that, although selectively drawing on Old World resources, were nevertheless wholly the products of locally eventuating and locally inflected histories of struggle (Mintz & Price 1992, Trouillot 1998, Price 2001). Also true is that in what to this day remains the most powerful attempt to model these processes of African American “culture building,” Mintz & Price (1992) recurred to an analogy to the emergence of forms of verbal communication among slaves and maroons, which linguists have classified as “creole” languages (see below). Nonetheless, to call these cultures “creole” or “creolized” may be to retroject anachronistically a modern terminology.

11 It may, thus, be no accident that the French term créol lost all its meaning as a referent to social identities in postrevolutionary Haiti, where the ending of the slave trade and the destruction of the plantation industry obliterated the structural foundations of distinctions between the foreign and the indigenized, and instead gave rise to more localized postcolonial regimes of domination and value extraction in which, as Mintz (1974, p. 271; compare Trouillot 1990) once put it, the physical appearance of the elite became a historical expression of its power.

Contemporaries rarely portrayed such emergent patterns of Afro-Caribbean social practice as “creole,” i.e., “locally nostrified” developments, but tended to see them as African holdovers or the racially determined—and so principally alien—patterns of behavior on the part of members of structurally defined groups (such as island-born “creole” slaves or freedpeople). Even after the end of slavery, the term creole, in certain regions, remained long unclaimed as an intentional predicate of Afro-Caribbean collective identities associated with such cultural forms and instead merely continued to mark categories of subalterns in official discourse.

For these reasons, Mintz (1971b, p. 487) urged that the emergence of “creole” identities in the insular Caribbean be studied “comparatively and differentially.” Yet his call for specificity has gone unheeded to this day. Instead, we see a massive blurring not just of modern and historical usages and meanings; even on a level of historical semantics, regional differences tend to get ironed out to, at times, genuinely obscurantist degrees. As Casimir (1992) charges, for example, transferring the postcolonial Latin American sense of “lo criollo” to the social institution and cultural form that emerged among the enslaved in the colonial Antilles would seem to imply “confusing the creations of the dominated ethnic groups with the adaptations of European institutions by the dominant ethnic group.” It was only when, and to the extent that, the ending of the slave trade, emancipation, and the absolute decline of Caribbean plantation economies after the middle of the nineteenth century cut off the constant African input that had demographically stabilized Caribbean plantation societies and submitted their elites to a similarly irreversible localization process by undercutting their political power vis-à-vis the metropolis that we begin to see the emergence of rhetorical uses of creole terminology that superficially—but not historically—resemble those of the Iberoamerican world. And it is at this point that two distinct
but interrelated processes begin to impart specificity to local conceptions of Caribbean “creoleness.” The first of these relates to—once more structurally grounded—differentiating (rather than homogenizing) semantic functions, which the terminology often acquired in the context of postemancipation attempts to inhibit the growth of landed but wage labor–dependent peasancies by large-scale importation of coerced Asian labor power. The second has to do with, as Bolland (1998; compare Thomas 2004) puts it, the absorption, in the twentieth century, of creolization discourse with its populist “emphasis upon the origins of a distinctive common culture as a basis for national unity” into the “ideology of a particular social segment, namely a middle class intelligentsia that seeks a leading role in an integrated, newly independent society” (p. 4).

In regard to the operation of the first of these semantic moments, we thus face a situation in which, in Drummond’s (1980) words, the term creole begins to locally articulate with “generalized belief system[s] based on the principle of ethnic difference: the notion that the social setting is populated by distinct kinds of people, who are what they are as a consequence of inborn qualities or deeply held beliefs manifest in their everyday behavior and difficult or impossible to renounce” (p. 354). As Lowenthal (1972) once observed, in the contemporary Caribbean, attributions of “creoleness” evoke an entire spectrum of locally varying patterns of “ethnic” boundary maintenance:

In Jamaica “Creole” designates anyone of Jamaican parentage except East Indians, Chinese, and Maroons (back-country descendants of runaway slaves, who are considered “African”). In Trinidad and Guyana it excludes Amerindians and East Indians; in Suriname it denotes the “civilized” coloured population, as apart from tribes of rebel-slave descent called Bush Negroes. In the French Antilles “Creole” refers more to local-born whites than to colored or black persons; in French Guyana, by contrast, it is used exclusively for nonwhites. (p. 32)

Notionally highlighting endemic divisions rather than suggesting their transcendence even in its “native habitat,” as a designator of Caribbean “identities,” the term creole would thus appear to create but illusory contrasts to the seemingly more rigidly exclusionary folk typologies of human kinds and communities observed elsewhere.14 Indeed, as Stewart (2007) wryly puts it, if “the world is in creolization the Caribbean, paradoxically, might have some catching up to do.”

From a regionalist perspective, it is therefore not surprising that the first systemic bodies of social theory produced by scholars from the Caribbean who aimed to capture analytically the peculiarities, prospects, and predicaments of the region—the “plantation society” and “plural society” theories most closely associated with George Beckford (1972) and Lloyd Best (1968) in the first case and M.G. Smith (1965) and his persistent critic R.T. Smith (1967) in the second—emphasized not just lasting structural inequalities held in place by the region’s global economic functions. They also foregrounded deep-seated cultural cleavages between population segments separated by complex hierarchies of race and class and united only in as far as systems of domination insured their participation in the one single institution they shared: the market. To be sure, the rigidity of both models has been roundly criticized.15 Yet even the more optimistic “creole society” thesis initially

14 Perhaps expectably, the creolization terminology has come under the most sustained criticism from students of Trinidad, where the descendants of Indian indentured laborers now not only form a demographic majority, but where such language, for historical as well as contemporary reasons, denotes either exclusion of Indo-Trinidadians from the national project or otherwise denigrates their identity in highly gender-specific ways (compare Mohammed 1988; Segal 1994; Reddock 1998; Gregg 2002; Munasinghe 2001; Khan 2001, 2004). See also Burton 1993 for the case of Martinique and Guadeloupe).

15 For particularly astute treatments of this debate see Berleant-Schiller (1981) and Austin (1983).
associated with the Barbadian historian and poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1971, 1974, 1984) has come under severe criticism not just because, as Bolland (1998) argues, it lacks a consistent theoretical basis and so tends to pass over the very structural contradictions and social conflicts that engendered the formation of uniquely Caribbean cultural constellations in the first place, but also because it “has functioned in the interest of the powerful, whether represented by the colonial or nationalist elite” by ideologically organizing locally “[c]ompeting interests and relations of exploitation and privilege […] in a fluid cli- nial system of racial and cultural hierarchy” that erases the historicity of, and synchronically normalizes, locally prevailing patterns “of allocation of economic, cultural, symbolic, and social values” in the ostensible service of national viability (Hintzen 2002, p. 477; compare Thomas 2004).

More damaging even is Williams’s (1991) charge that Caribbean creolization rhetoric masks the strategic incorporation on the part of local elites of cultural forms associated with subordinate groups into self-consciously “cre- ole” cultural projects, while not only continuing to marginalize the originators of such cultural forms but also excluding them from the national project if they resist such appropriation. Although focused on Guyana, her remarks hold equally true in the case of the Jamaican elite’s protracted incorporation of symbols deriving from the Rastafari movement (Waters 1985, van Dijk 1988), for example, or the Cuban state’s policy of belatedly laying claims on the nation’s “African her- itage” while suppressing the public circulation of signs of “blackness” when taken as emblematic of collective forms of identity (compare Moore 1997, Hansing 2001, Hagedorn 2001, Brown 2003, Fernandes 2003):

Under these conditions, those groupings as- sociated with objects, acts, and ideas treated in this manner are placed at both a pragmatic and ideological disadvantage. If they continue to insist on the root identity [sic] of their selves and the objects, acts, and ideas associated with those selves, they are not “true” members of the ideologically defined nation. (Williams 1991, p. 30)

Similarly troubling for those of us who expect creolization terminology to deliver the analytical “open specificity” (Bernabé et al. 1989) of a “Third Space” (Bhabha 1990) beyond both ideological capture and empiricist reductionism is the critique leveled by Burton (1993), Arnold (1994), Condé & Cottenet-Hage (1995), and Price & Price (1997) against the proponents of the Martiniquan literary “créolité” movement and the glot- topolitical programmatic advanced through its academic incarnation GEREC (Groupe d’Études et de Recherches en Espace de la Créolophonie). In the views of these crit- ics, the claim that Caribbean “créolité” (as launched in the manifesto Eloge de la Créolité by Bernabé et al.) designates a “new di- mension of man, whose prefigured shadow we are,” a “nontotalitarian consciousness of a preserved diversity” for which “complex- ity is the very principle of […] identity” (Bernabé et al. 1989, p. 88) reflects the historically specific, ultimately provincial (and masculinist) concerns of a local intellec- tual elite operating within the context of a culturally highly homogeneous society that constitutes a département of France—and so effectively is a part of the European community with all the economic and cultural impli- cations this political status entails. “Prospective and progressive in theory,” writes Burton (1993), “Créolité is in practice often retro- spective, even regressive, in character, falling back, in a last desperate recourse against dec- reolization, into the real or imagined cre- ole plenitude of an tan lontan (olden times)” (p. 23, emphasis added) of a Martiniquan culture whose agricultural base “has been eroded beyond all possibility of restoration, leaving that culture—where it survives at all—increasingly bereft of any anchorage in the actual lived experience of contemporary French West Indians and, as such, subject to
a fatal combination of folklorization, exotification, and commodification” (pp. 7–8). Hence Price & Price’s (1997) vitriolic charge that the intensely politicized debates about linguistic practice (and particularly orthography) in Martinique represent a shadowboxing match between an-organic intellectuals struggling to counteract the assimilatory effects contingent on the privileges of Martinique’s departmental status and inclusion in the European Union. Constituting a “rhetorical wish list” rather than “an examination of creolization on the ground” (Khan 2001, p. 282), or offering a theoretically consistent analytics, the Éloge is perhaps better understood as an expression of a particular constellation of political and cultural contradictions specific to the French Départements d’Outre-Mer than as an empirically grounded analysis thereof—let alone anything that could easily be generalized beyond its contextual conditions of articulation.

As should be evident from even such a cursory examination of the history of terms such as “creole,” “creolization,” and “créolité,” and their functionalization in indigenously Caribbean analytical and political projects, it is difficult to understand how—other than by retrospectively constructing a “Caribbean” of the (nonregionalist) anthropological imagination—we could ever have regarded the region as a “prototype” (in both temporal and evolutionary senses) of an allegedly global postmodern condition. Unless, that is, we understand—as Khan (2001) argues—“creolization’s reputed specificity to the Caribbean” as “a particular fiction that invents the region” (p. 272) in the service of no less particular ideological and theoretical projects originating outside of it. But, of course, indigenously Caribbean conceptual language is not the only source of the proliferating mangrove of metaphors in which anthropologists eager to transcend older descriptive and analytical vocabularies are casting about. Another powerful strain of “creolization” tropes has been emanating from a specific branch of linguistics for at least four decades now. Hence it is probably not accidental that, in his first influential formulation of what some of us now regard as a veritable “creolization paradigm,” Hannerz (1987) recurred not to a single intellectual (or social scientist) from the Caribbean. Instead, his main sources of inspiration would seem to have been a brief formulation by Johannes Fabian (1978) who merely suggested exploring pidgin and creole linguistics as a source of theoretical inspiration in the study of African popular culture and a more ambitious text by Drummond (1980) that explicitly analogized a, then as now, hotly contested universalist theory of linguistic processes to similarly universalistically conceived cultural dynamics in the context of a Guyanese case study. And this, indeed—rather than the matrix of historical usage and limited ethnographic generalization—is where we, too, should look for some of the features that have made the metaphors of “creolization” (for we really are dealing with intermeshing figures of speech rather than disciplined forms of comparison) so attractive to some of us.

UN-NATURAL LANGUAGES, CULTURAL GRAMMATICS, FEEDBACK LOOPS

Restrictions of space do not permit an adequate exploration of the vast and highly contentious literature on linguistic theories of “creolization” and their transfer to social theory. However, linguists were, in fact, the first scholars who plucked the term creole from New World vernaculars and aimed to operationalize it as the designation of an analytically identifiable class of phenomena (rather than a mere congeries of historically contingent local “individualities,” which, given

16Compare Segal (1994) for a similar argument concerning the disjunctions between Trinadian perceptions of pluralism as the effect of a “particular memorialization of the past” and the island’s historical and contemporary social and cultural realities. Hagedorn (2001) and Brown (2003) provide examples for the operation of a similar moment in contemporary Cuban cultural politics.
the above, tended to be the case in the ethnographic literature on Latin America and the Caribbean, at least until quite recently). Descriptive use of the term for linguistic phenomena arguably originates with Moravian lexicographical efforts in the eighteenth-century Danish West Indies (Stein 1998, Palmié 2007b). But it took at least another century before their missiologically motivated and entirely pragmatic adjectival usage of “creole” for the language of the heterogeneous population locally designated as “the Creoles” became the basis for systematic efforts, on the part of scholars such as van Name, Coelho, or Schuchart, at classifying the languages developed by subaltern colonial populations and isolating them (from the rest of supposedly “natural” languages) as a theoretically salient anomaly.17 In light of the conceptual linkages between language, culture, and peoplehood that had been gaining ground in Europe since the days of Condillac and Herder, these languages now not only appeared to disrupt those modern linguistic ideologies18 that eventually came to undergird what Barth (1969, p. 11) once summed up as the traditional proposition that “a race = a culture = a language,” but also significantly disturbed the reigning arboreal, proto-Darwinian metaphors of an emergent historical linguistics, and did so precisely because their origin could not be retrojected into (even only a fictive Rousseauian) state of nature in which the “volksgeist” of a people became irrevocably attached to a homogeneous linguistic medium, subject only to gradual and continuous evolutionary branching and change (Alter 1999; compare Olender 1992, Mufwene 2002).20 Hence, far from stimulating a revaluation of postenlightenment conceptions of languages as “natural kinds” (or, at least, “objective” entities) discretely distributed in social space, creole linguistics was firmly anchored in precisely such conceptions right from the start: Whatever else studies of Caribbean (and other colonial) sociolects contributed to the linguistic enterprise before the 1950s largely consisted in isolating specific “linguistic defects” (from the viewpoint of the reigning evolutionary school of thought, that is) common to these seemingly anomalous and artificial subaltern vernaculars to characterize negatively what a “proper” language should look like, how it ought to be acquired, and who should be speaking it.

This initially descriptive and, at best, vaguely typologizing concept of languages associated with some (but by no means all!) populations designated as “creole” subsequently underwent rather thoroughgoing mutations. By the time the second international conference on creole linguistics was held in Mona (Jamaica) in 1968, the designator “creole” had become transformed in at least three distinct ways: It began to function as a classificatory device for isolating certain types of hybrid languages originating in colonial contexts; it became complemented by a novel nominalized verb form to represent the linguistic processes from which such languages emerged (“creolization”); and it attained analytical significance as a concept claimed by various theoretical “schools” purporting to explain the structural and phonological features of creole languages in relation to widely divergent

17 Calling “criolisch” the language of the Creoles ("die Sprache der Criolen"), Oldendorp (1777, p. 232) thus obviously modeled the heterogeneous origins of the sociolect he was trying to codify in analogy to the heterogeneous origins of the population. Irrespective of their origins (in Africa or Europe), or their social positions (as slaves or free person), the creoles were of diverse origin. So were the linguistic forms in which they communicated.

18 See Holm (1989, Ch. 2) for an introduction to the European “discovery” of creole languages.


20 As Jourdan (1991, p. 189) sums up the matter in an important review of the state of creole linguistics in the late twentieth century, the way linguists “came to reify pidgins and creoles sufficiently to create homogenizing analytical tools and categories is without doubt linked to our intellectual tradition.” But, she continues, this has nevertheless “led to a surprising conception of pidgins and creoles as a special group of languages, almost extraneous to the rest of human languages, those that are ‘natural.’”
hypotheses about their origins.\textsuperscript{21} This move from description to analysis undoubtedly was a fruitful one as far as linguistics is concerned. But it proved eminently problematic once anthropologists and historians began to import linguistic theory into their studies of what came to be called “creole cultures” and processes of “cultural creolization” as a sort of “magic bullet” (Briggs 2002). It is clear today that, no less than in the case of earlier theoretical borrowings from structural and transformative linguistics, the transposition of sequences initially postulated on a typological plane to the level of historical process created a massive confusion of analytical tongues.

Why this would have been the case is fairly obvious. Linguists, at least, seem well prepared to acknowledge that their attempts at generalizing about the genesis and development of creole languages as media of communicative praxis (rather than as abstract systems of phonological or morphosyntactical features) stand and fall with sociolinguistic inferences impossible to draw in the absence of detailed historical data. Referring to the so-called pidginization/creolization cycle, which, to this day, underlies most anthropological attempts to harness linguistic models to historically conceived questions of cultural dynamics, Holm (1989), for example, gingerly admits that the “process of creolization or nativization (by which a pidgin acquires native speakers) is still not completely understood, but it is thought to be the opposite of pidginization: a process of expansion rather than reduction” (p. 7, emphasis in the original). The problem here becomes immediately evident when one considers that reduction and expansion or complexification refer to logical sequences on a classificatory or taxonomic plane that cannot possibly be directly diachronized let alone mapped onto (empirically insufficiently known) historical processes. How ironic, then, that the very typological transitions sociocultural anthropologists are aiming to “calque” (Silverstein 2005) were themselves initially formulated on the basis of speculative extrapolation from inadequately understood local histories.

Jourdan (1991) thus notes that in positing a seemingly predictable transition from highly restricted pidgins developed by speakers of mutually unintelligible languages to full-blown creoles among their descendants, linguists “relied heavily, and of necessity, on ‘Just So’ stories from the Caribbean and other plantation settings” (p. 192)—contexts in which concrete evidence of precisely such transformations is notoriously lacking. McWhorter (2000) consequently speaks of an “inevitable post hoc-ness in tracing the emergence of a creole” (p. 38) and suggests that the vague and ambiguous nature of the historical record for the Caribbean has given linguists near-unlimited interpretative leeway in concocting explanations for the presence or absence of creole languages in certain regions. Harris & Rampton (2002) likewise argue that the substratist-universalist debate is based in speculative theorizing and ideological contention driven by a “search for total explanation, licensed by the paucity of the historical record” (p. 35) and marked by widespread reification of language as mere “system output” rather than as the product of historically contextualized human communicative agency. Their conclusion about the usefulness of creolization as a conceptual tool in social and historical analysis comes as no surprise: “[T]here do seem to be good grounds for doubting the value of traditional creole language study as a ground-breaking model or template for the analysis of cultural contact” (Harris & Rampton 2002, p. 38).\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21}See DeCamp (1971) for a fairly balanced overview of the issues involved at the time when anthropologists first began to borrow explicitly from creole linguistics.

\textsuperscript{22}This is to say nothing about the opinions of those creolists who are now arguing that the creole language/creolization concepts have overreached or exhausted their usefulness for linguists (e.g., Sankoff 1983 and Muysken 1988, both cited in Jourdan 1991, p. 191; Mufwene 1997; Parkvall 2002).
Painful as this may be to those of us who rely on linguistically derived modeling devices for ordering their data, the fact is that linguistic theories of creolization now do not stand and fall on the kind of abstract predictive potential we expect from them when we import them into our work, but rather thrive on the sketchy and oftentimes rather problematic primary data linguists in turn cull from the anthropological and historical literature. Bakker (2002) thus laments that creole genesis scenarios, in many instances, are “purely speculative, but they are quoted as fact by other creolists” (p. 75) and exasperatedly charges that creolists “should be forbidden from making any claims on history or life on plantations without reference to the work of historians” (p. 75). The trouble is, however, that those historians may already have been reading creolist texts. For what we are facing is a strange cross-disciplinary feedback loop in which anthropologists and historians recycle as theory the speculations linguists generate from anthropological and historical data increasingly produced and organized on the basis of linguistic hypotheses.

Perhaps predictably, this is most glaringly evident in the study of Caribbean and, more generally, African American cultures. Here the moment of theoretical “calquing” goes all the way back to the Herskovits’ (Herskovits & Herskovits 1936, pp. 114–35; Herskovits 1941, pp. 280–81) initial supposition that “substrate” theories about how African linguistic structures (of wider or narrower definition) provided the morpho- syntactic and phonological molds into which European lexical items were poured (“superlexification”) could help account for the features (“traits”) shared among geographically dispersed African American cultures (compare Palmié 2007b). Given the metatheoretical linkages Boas himself had established between language and culture (Briggs 2002, Silverstein 2005), it was only a small step down a well-prepared metaphorical slope for Herskovits to assert the comparability of the “similarities in the grammar of language over the entire West African region with what may be termed the grammar of culture, one finds in a similar situation [i.e., in the same ‘culture area’]” (p. 281, emphasis added). Variously picked up by linguists (e.g., Turner 1949, Hall 1950) who, by the 1950s, had begun a vigorous debate about the viability of “substrate” hypotheses, elements of this conception ironically gained a new lease on life in cultural anthropology where, in the early 1970s, Mintz & Price (1992 [1976]) launched a thoroughgoing methodological critique of prior scholarship on the historical anthropology of African American cultures. Arguing from sociological and historicist perspectives Mintz & Price strongly emphasized processually induced discontinuities in Atlantic cultural transmission and the importance of New World syntheses in the creation of those cultural forms that came to integrate African American communities (Yelvington 2001, Palmié 2007b). Yet while they dealt a vigorous blow to Neo-Herskovitsian searches for New World “Africanisms” based merely on the comparison of decontextualized data from both sides

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23 This irony is compounded in the following statement by a linguist whose work does not always evidence particular fastidiousness in his use of historical and ethnographic materials himself: “...[I]n terms of our knowledge of creole cultures, we are precisely where we were with creole languages a century ago. The absence of reliable descriptions of these cultures, and our ignorance of the sociohistorical conditions of creolization and the terminus a quo, are such that anyone at all can say whatever he or she pleases about creole cultures. As a result, purely ideological positions, which are harder and harder to defend in the linguistic domain, have been freely advanced in the domain of culture, where everybody believes they can dream or wander as they please” (Chaudenson 2001, p. 196).

24 Substrate-influence arguments had been launched in linguistics at least since the late 1920s. The most spectacular case certainly was that of the Haitian linguist Suzanne Sylvain who, in 1936, famously described Haitian creole as “an Ewe language with a French vocabulary” (Holm 1989, p. 37). For the debate ensuing after ∼1950, see, e.g., DeCamp (1971, p. 20), Alleyne (1980), Muysken & Smith (1986), Holm (1989, pp. 37–44), Arends et al. (1995), Arends (2002).
of the Atlantic, they nevertheless revived the notion that widely shared “deep structural” or “grammatical” principles of generalized West African provenance had been operative in the formation of African American cultures.25 Perhaps wisely, Mintz & Price never mentioned the word “creolization” in the original text of their contribution (but see the preface of the 1992 edition and Price 2001). Yet such was the tenor of the stream of metaphors busily interacting at the interface of linguistics and cultural anthropology since Herskovits’ time that their call for a rigorous historicization of African Americanist scholarship was almost immediately assimilated to (oftentimes highly bowdlerized) versions of linguistic substrate theory.

Although historians of North American slavery were first to succumb to the power of the linguistic metaphors Mintz & Price appeared to have put at their disposal (see the literature cited in Palmié 2007b), archaeologists soon followed suit. In a surprisingly influential formulation, Ferguson (1992) thus suggested that in “cultural creolization” processes, “material things are part of the lexicon of culture while the ways they were made, used, perceived are part of the grammar” (p. xlii). It is, of course, not inconceivable to represent object distributions metaphorically as a kind of vocabulary sample of material culture. Yet it is hard to see how the large number of unknowns involved in archaeological inference about use (let alone meaning) could possibly lead to an understanding of a body of formal rules governing the syntactical articulation of objects independent of the particular “utterances” represented by a specific site—unless, that is, an independently preconceived “grammar” (culled, in this case, from African ethnography) governs the organization of data in the first place. Singleton (1995), who is by no means unsympathetic to Ferguson’s approach, thus readily admits that it deliberately overplays certain types of evidence and may not, after all, represent “the best approach to understanding the archaeological record of many African-American sites” (p. 133). Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at the “creolization” literature produced in this field makes clear that the genie is out of the bottle. Not only is “creolization” the subject of a recent special issue of Historical Anthropology (Dawdy 2000a), but it is also rapidly diffusing out of its geohistorical context of origin, having reached, as of now, Roman Gaul (Webster 2001) and aboriginal Australia (Birmingham 2000). No doubt, some of these newer archaeological deployments of the creolization metaphor are far more subtle than Ferguson’s crude analogy to dubious linguistics, and often express criticism of the decontextualizing, reductionist, and ultimately depoliticizing tendencies inherent in “creole” metaphorics (e.g., Ewen 2000, Dawdy 2000b, Gundaker 2000, Armstrong 2003). But they nevertheless raise troubling questions about the velocity of feedback within the interdisciplinary metaphoric loops in which “creolization” research has become entangled. Once processed by one discipline or subfield, what is now occasionally still recognized as linguistically inspired output in history, archaeology and cultural anthropology may well attain the status of data input in those branches of creole linguistics dependent on precisely the kinds of “primary data” historians, cultural anthropologists, and archaeologists are cobbled together on the basis of outmoded, and sometimes ill-understood, linguistic hypotheses.

CONCLUSION: BACK TO (HUMAN) NATURE?

There remains, of course, a final position to consider, and it allows me to return to the question about universalism and historical particularism raised at the beginning of this review. It is probably not accidental that most cultural anthropologists keen on theorizing about “creolization” (with the notable exception of Drummond 1980) have steered clear
of literal transpositions of Bickerton’s (e.g., 1981, 1984) so-called “language bioprogram hypothesis” to the cultural level. This may be the case because we have increasingly become wary of “human universals.” Given our discipline’s long history of ideological complicity in the normalization of peculiarly Western folk anthropologies as “human nature,” and given also our current skepticism toward totalizing analytical narratives more generally, it may, perhaps, be perceived as not altogether surprising that even the staunchest advocates of extending a “creolization” terminology to the ends of the earth appear reluctant to follow up fully the implications of Bickerton’s original formulation—or even to take Drummond at his word when he suggested that once rigorously conceptualized along Bickertonian lines we may, in fact, no longer be able to speak of separate cultures. Once we let go of the conceit of, even only analytically, separable cultures (or languages, for that matter) and treat cultures and languages as artificially reified instances of variations produced by humanity’s universal faculty to symbolize in infinitely diverse ways, we eo ipso lose purchase on all senses in which we could use the term “creolization” to express anything (we feel is) novel about the particular world we inhabit. Once viewed from the perspective of the inevitable continua of meaningful communicative forms produced by humanity’s innate signifying capacity, precisely those criteria that some hold as indicative of our world’s being “in creolization” would ultimately reduce to those that differentiate Homo sapiens sapiens from other higher primates. If so, there would be no surprise in anyone’s discovery of “creolization” processes in, say, Ulan Bator and Kinshasa—or in Minoan Crete and Pre-Incan Highland South America, for that matter.

Chances are that such discoveries are merely a matter of time. If so, however, it may behoove us to rethink the very epistemological grounds on which such “discoveries” could become distinguishable from—or enabled by—“normal science” in the first place. The matter arguably boils down to a metatheoretical question of conceptual politics, which mutatis mutandis bespeaks the inevitable politicization of concepts at the interface not just between intra- and interdisciplinary discourses but also between extradisciplinary ones as well. If we accept that entities called languages or cultures are themselves sociocultural constructs that are “only stable—hence, when perduring, classifiable—outcomes of dialectical valorization processes among populations of people,” including anthropological communities of discourse (Silverstein 1998, p. 402), then the question of what “creolization” metaphors (whether of “Caribbean” or “linguistic” tenor) can or cannot do for us needs to be rephrased. This is so not only because the figure of the universal, hence boundless, “postplural” creole continuum exposes to “unmarked” indeterminacy the nature-culture distinction on which cultural anthropology has long built its fiction of cultures as discretely speciating artifacts natural to the human condition (Strathern 1992, Maurer 1997) but also because it throws into sharp relief the nature of those discriminating technologies by which those differences that make a difference within institutionally anchored structures of awareness are established and authorized. Viewed thus, “creolization theory” (whatever that may be) is neither a remedy for the alleged or real reifications of an older anthropology construed as a postmodern whipping boy nor an effective antidote against the kind of contemporary “culture talk” among metropolitan intellectuals at both ends of the political spectrum; least of all is it anything that we ought to project carelessly into peripheral scenarios—whether such language has played an explicitly politicized role there or not. This is so, because “creolization theory” is ultimately a mere reflex of the very conditions it seeks to denounce and supercede—and so, once properly conceptualized, might itself be more profitably regarded as an object of, rather than a tool for, anthropological inquiry.
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