

Creolization

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Creolization offers a conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which different racialized groups interact to give rise to new social, cultural, and racial formations. Emerging out of the Caribbean, the concept illuminates both a process and, in some uses of the term, a political conviction rooted in the recognition of the historical circumstances of peoples brought together by European colonialism. The plantation complex established through the dispossession of Indigenous peoples was the site for the exploitation of enslaved Africans and eventually, Asian indentured servants. The resultant interactions between Europeans, Africans, and Asians, which were uneven and fraught by their very nature, have been the focus of conversations about creolization. Defined as simultaneously “descriptive and analytical,” creolization emerges from the lived realities of subaltern subjects (Lionnet and Shih 2011, 2). Initially used for descendants of European settlers, by the eighteenth century creole came to refer to Black, white, or mixed-race people in the Caribbean, Mascarene Islands, and in the U.S. South (Lionnet and Shih 2011, 22).

Notwithstanding the seeming capaciousness of the concept and its ability to make visible the experiences of various communities brought into proximity with one another through colonization, early theorizations of creolization have been critiqued for their singular emphasis on some groups and relative inattention to others. For instance, some of the seminal works on creolization in the Caribbean focus primarily on the interaction between Europeans and enslaved African peoples. Later scholars have addressed this and expanded the scope of what creolization means in the Caribbean. Indeed, as Shalini Puri usefully reminds us, “creolization as a figure for Caribbean hybridity has its own complex legacy of exclusion” (2004, 65). The provenance of the term however is not confined to the Caribbean and is frequently used to describe social processes in other parts of the world. Connected by the history of colonialism, the plantation economy, slavery, and [indentureship](#), the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean have served as two of several sites from where creolization has been theorized, often to name distinct rather than identical processes.

As a concept for studying the social, cultural, and racial mixing of different communities, creolization calls attention to a set of cognate concepts such as hybridity, *mestizaje* and syncretism, to name just a few. Puri (2004), for instance, uses hybridity as a conceptual umbrella that encompasses several identity categories such as creole, *jíbaro*, *mestizo*, *mulatto*, and *douglá*. A quick look at edited volumes seeking to historicize creolization reveals continuing efforts to understand it in relation to these kindred concepts, each of which has its own situated history and, much like creolization, continues to remain entrenched in different orders of emphasis and exclusion. Ella Shohat’s cautionary words about certain modes of studying hybridity and syncretism hold true here: “a celebration of syncretism and hybridity per se, if not articulated in conjunction with questions of hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the *fait accompli* of colonial violence.” If used as “a descriptive catch-all term,” it fails to differentiate “the diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence” (Shohat 1992, 109-110). Creolization too runs the same risk when abstracted from the material conditions under which different racial groups were made proximate to and interacted with one another. Echoing this, Nigel O. Bolland calls for a dialectical approach to the study of creolization; one that is attuned to the “centrality of relations of domination/subordination, including class relations” in shaping Caribbean society (2002, 37-38).

Terms such as transculturation, acculturation, and interculturalization, common to studies of creolization, perform the critical task of naming the specific nature or direction of cultural change. While acculturation has been described as the process by which one culture absorbs another, interculturalization refers to a more reciprocal process of intermixture. The term transculturation was first used by Fernando Ortiz (1940) in response to what he saw as the limitations of the term “acculturation.” It describes the transition from one culture to another as marked by not just acculturation but also disacculturation that ultimately leads to the creation of new cultural phenomena. Mary Louise Pratt builds on this definition in *Imperial Eyes*, suggesting that transculturation is a constant feature of the contact zone or social spaces “where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (2008, 7). Pratt’s explicit recognition of the asymmetries of power is vital to any understanding of transculturation.

If creolization illuminates how different groups transform under specific historical conditions, how might we understand the terms and nature of this transformation? Do certain groups’ cultural forms and practices dominate this process of seeming exchange? Is the creolized identity or social formation a new creation or is it always already marked by dominant power relations? These are some of the questions that studies of creolization have asked and sought to answer, examining materials that range from the most private and quotidian practices to public and collective ones, scholars discuss racial intimacies, language, food, religion, dance, and music. This essay follows the trails of these questions, rehearses key scholarship on creolization that have come out of the Caribbean and turns briefly to the Indian Ocean in order to historicize the concept and its areas of emphases. It also engages critiques of the fundamental assumptions and blind spots of earlier studies of creolization. The piece ends by reflecting on the affordances and limitations of a somewhat generalist approach to the question of creolization whereby the term is used to describe cultural adaptation and the interchange of objects, information, and capital in contemporary global culture (Hannerz 1996; Sheller 2003).

Creolization in the Caribbean: Definitions

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, one of the pioneering figures in the study of creolization, defines it as a process (rather than a product) that is material, psychological and spiritual, “based on the stimulus/response of individuals...to their [new] environment and to each other,” eventually leading to the creation of a “totally new construct” (1971, 11). In *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (1971), Brathwaite trained a critical eye on Jamaican identity, arguing that people from Britain and West Africa who lived, worked, settled, or were born in Jamaica were responsible for the formation of a society with a distinctive character that was neither purely British nor West African but creole. The specificity of the social context in which creolization takes place is emphasized in Brathwaite’s clarification that creole societies are caught up “in some kind of colonial arrangement with a metropolitan European power, on the one hand, and a plantation arrangement on the other; and where the society is multi-racial but organized for the benefit of a minority European origin” (1971, xxxi). The uneven power relations of the colonial context and the heterogeneity of the cultural formations forged under it emerge as key ideas here.

In *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974), Brathwaite expanded on the concept of creolization to suggest that it:

may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case the enslaved/African to the European); and inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship from the yoke (6).

Edouard Glissant recognizes the role of power and subaltern subjects’ responses to it as central to creolization when he describes creolization as the linguistic outcome of a “forced poetics,” the invention of a language and shared culture under the pressures of historical erasure by European

colonists. In *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), he observes that as a cross-cultural language forged as a medium of communication on the plantation, the role of creole was essentially one of defiance (127). Brathwaite too dwells on the question of language in "History of the Voice 1979/1981," where he calls creole the "submerged language" of the Caribbean enslaved population that moves from "a purely African form to a form which was African but which adapted to the new environment and adapted to the cultural imperative of the European language" (Shepherd and Richards 2002, xiii).

Brathwaite's work, scholars have argued, can be read as a response to the "plural society" thesis that informed cultural anthropology of the Caribbean in the mid-twentieth century (Shepherd and Richards 2002, xii-xiii; Sheller 2020, 279). However, this work is somewhat circumscribed by its attention to only the encounter between Europeans and Africans as the site of creolization (Munasinghe 2006; Jackson 2012). In a less frequently discussed essay published in 1974/75, Brathwaite did offer, if only fleetingly, a more expansive conceptualization of creolization as "a socio-cultural description and explanation of the way the four main culture-carriers of the region: Amerindian, European, African and East Indian: interacted with each other and with their environment to create the new societies of the New World" (1974, 274). East Indians drop out of this theorization soon after and African creolization unfolds at the expense of Indigenous histories and cultures (Jackson 2012). Nevertheless, Brathwaite's scholarship remains vital in conversations on creolization and, as Veronica Gregg observes, continues to offer a discursive space for scholars' agreements and disagreements with his arguments (2002, 149).

Verene Shepherd and Glen Richards observe that the publication of Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past* (1976) set the stage for subsequent debates between scholars who, like Mintz and Price, understand creole cultures as new creations and those like Mervyn Allen and many Caribbean linguists who stressed "cultural continuity between Africa and the Caribbean and (advanced) Afrogenesis as an explanation of many of the cultural patterns described as Creole" (Shepherd and Richards 2002, xiii). Brathwaite, Shepherd and Richards "came down firmly and unapologetically on the side of Afrogenesis" while "the strongest rejection of the Afrogenetic thesis [came] from the French Caribbean in the form of the concept of creolite" (xiii).

In their 1989 text, *Eloge de la Créolité [In Praise of Creoleness]*, Martinican novelists Raphael Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau and Guadeloupean linguist Jean Bernabé declared, "Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles" (1990, 886). For these authors, creoleness was "the *interactional or transactional* aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements united on the same soil by the yoke of history" (891). Even as they see creoleness as the annihilation of false universality, monolingualism and discourses of purity the authors are careful to clarify that it is neither a uniform process nor a homogenous identity. Rather it is a "double process" that involves "the adaptation of Europeans, Africans and Asians to the New World on the one hand, and on the other hand, the cultural confrontation of these peoples within the same space, resulting in a mixed culture called Creole" (894). Confiant, Chamoiseau and Bernabé's conception of creoleness aspires towards a geographic expansiveness that exceeds the immediate context of its emergence, the French Caribbean, as the foundation for political solidarities. As they explain, Caribbean creoles enjoy a double solidarity: first, a Caribbean solidarity with people of the archipelago irrespective of cultural differences and second, "a Creole solidarity" with all African, Mascarene, Asian and Polynesian peoples who share in the experience of creoleness (894).

As a manifesto, a programmatic assertion of creole identity rooted in testimony rather than theory, *Eloge* has been the subject of both praise and scrutiny. The créolité movement as such has been critiqued by Mary Gallagher who identifies a central paradox in the movement, a "tension between its visionary claims and its revisionist perspective, between its particularistic retrospection and its globalist pretensions" (2010, 98). The latter, she says, is especially evident in their assertion that beyond the plantation system that enabled creolization, "the entire world is approaching a state of creoleness in that every people and every culture is increasingly entering into relation with others" (2010, 98). Shalini Puri too calls attention to the ways in which the créolistes' seemingly global gaze ultimately remains circumscribed by French ideology and colonial history (2004, 36). Writing specifically about *Eloge*, Gallagher (2010) critiques the historicist frame in which the manifesto places the créolité

movement. A teleology in which Caribbean identity moves from negritude (marked by ideas of essence), through antillanité (concerned with the contingencies of existence), to creoleness (where essence tussles with process), she argues, leaves out Glissant's later work that explores creolization more deeply than the créolité movement.

Much like Brathwaite and the créolistes, many of whom were Glissant's students, for Glissant creolization named the production of identities facilitated by the specificities of the New World context. Creolization, he argued, was a process of becoming, a deliberate movement away from the idea of origins: a synthesis of elements, rather than a process of bastardization, in which each element was enriched by the interaction (1989, 8). In this declaration, Lorna Burns reads a direct reference to Glissant's relationship with the negritude movement, more specifically his move away from its principles to suggest creolization, instead, "as a mixed identity that refuses to solidify into a specified fixed model" (2009, 101). Burns further argues that this feature of Glissant's philosophy distinguishes it from Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant's idea of créolité as the successor of both negritude and Glissant's antillanité (Caribbeanness). Even though the créolistes and Glissant may agree in their critique of negritude, they diverge in their conceptualization of creoleness, especially the former's insistence on it "as an achieved state of being." Such a view, however, repeats "a foundationalist politics of identity that is logically equivalent to the Old World identities that are being renounced" (Bongie 1998, 64). Glissant thus emphasizes that creolization is not "a halfway between two "pure" extremes" but the "impossibility of legitimate lineages, pure racial origins, or reified cultural affiliation" (Burns 101-102).

Beyond the European-African Encounter: Creolization's Omissions

With the exception of the créolistes to some degree, the discussion of creolization rehearsed so far confirms Percy Hintzen's observation that "for the most part, the indigenous and diaspora communities with cultural and racial origins outside of Africa and Europe remain, in representation and practice, outside of Creole reality" (2002, 99). How might the conversation about creolization shift were we to turn our attention from the dominant and subordinate group dynamics to lateral relations between different historically marginalized and subjugated groups that shared space in the plantation colonies of the Caribbean? In engaging this question, Viranjini Munasinghe (2006), Rhoda Reddock (1998), Patricia Mohammed (2002), and Aisha Khan (2004), among others, call attention to the historical and ideological circumstances that led these subjugated groups, particularly East Indians, to cultivate deeply complex relationships—irreducible to easy acceptance or rejection—to the idea of racial and cultural mixing.[\[1\]](#)

Viranjini Munasinghe critiques the differential treatment of East Indians in the key texts of Caribbean creolization. For instance, she highlights how in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica: 1770-1820* (1971) and in *Contradictory Omens* (1974), Brathwaite presents East Indians as late entrants in Caribbean society who were not only external to the creolization process but who also changed the trajectory of Creole society into a plural one. He thus ends up reifying the idea "that foundational actors have exclusive rights to the creolization process itself" (2006, 555). Again, Stuart Hall's invocation of "présence africaine, présence europeene, and présence americaine" (the African, European and American presence) in the Caribbean has no room for the Asian presence (2010, 30). It is, however, subsumed within the African presence, as evident in Hall's admission that the présence africaine is not always African in a geographical sense but includes "the powerful voices of the East Indian community" who share similar experiences of dispossession (30). Despite Hall's admission that these communities share a rather volatile relationship, his heuristic model of Caribbean society does not account for Asian presence and participation in creolization (Kabir 2020, 177).

If Munasinghe critiques the representation of East Indians within theories of creolization, Aisha Khan offers an account of how the relationship between Indo- and Afro-Caribbeans (Trinidadians, specifically) have in fact been represented in both colonial and postcolonial discourse. The dominant narrative about

this relationship has been one of antagonism “locally interpreted as inherent 'racial' and sometimes 'cultural incompatibility’” (2004, 165). Taking a historical view of such a mode of representation, Khan explains that by the time Indian laborers arrived in Trinidad in the mid-nineteenth-century, Trinidad “was a society already structured by race and class hierarchies” (2004, 172). Indians were not only seen as economic threats to newly emancipated Africans but also “cultural oddities in their garb, their languages (primarily Bhojpuri, but other as well), their cuisines, their forms of social organization (kinship, marriage), and their cosmologies” (2004, 170). This process was hardly one-sided and in response Indians turned “to the discursive weapons at their disposal too: the extant forms of colonial racism against Afro-Trinidadians” (2004, 170). In mobilizing the idea of Indians’ inherent racial and caste bias against Afro-Creoles, the dominant view of race relations ignores a range of material factors such as economic competition and lack of mobility on the plantation that could have had serious implications for these groups’ ability to mix with one another (Diptee 2000; Khan 2004). Puri offers the useful reminder that colonial claims about the lack of interaction between Indians and Africans depended on ignoring legislation “that was intended precisely to halt processes of cultural hybridization that were generating cross-ethnic imagined communities at the popular level” (2004, 44). Introduced as “buffers” between emancipated African peoples and European planters, the smooth functioning of the plantation was contingent on keeping Asians (Chinese and eventually Indians) separate from other racialized groups (Lowe 2015). The proliferation of ordinances in the nineteenth century aimed at regulating these groups’ cultural practices is but one instance of how the colonial government sought to achieve this goal.^[2]

Both Khan and Puri argue that despite colonial insistence on the lack of mixing between Indians and Africans, they did in fact creolize. Khan notes that the presence of the colloquial term “dougla,” which refers to people of mixed African and Indian heritage in the Anglophone Caribbean lexicon coupled with the presence of “Mixed” as an official category in the Trinidad census “should both serve as good indications that there was more going on than what was apparent to the colonial gaze, and, later, than what Indos themselves would acknowledge” (2004, 171-172). This final comment about Indians’ own hesitation about acknowledging mixed identities is crucial as it reveals certain sections of the community’s investment in the discourse of social and racial purity which was seen to be under threat in the multiracial plantation colony. Extending this conversation further and offering the sobering reminder that creolization may not always invite triumphalist analyses, Patricia Mohammed argues that the term creole carried pejorative connotations for the Indian community for whom it was “synonymous with the absorption of Black culture at the expense of one’s own” (2002, 130). The mixed-race figure of the “dougla,” however, serves as affirmation of racial mixing. At the same time, colonial anxieties around such racially indeterminate figures reveals its transgressive potential. As Puri explains, “if the ‘Indian’ and ‘African’ are discursively held apart by a series of stereotypical oppositions, then the figure of the dougla becomes an interesting site for the collision of classifications, for negotiations over the dougla’s racial ‘value’ and place in a racially hierarchized society, and for the disruption of the notions of racial purity upon which racial stereotypes depend” (2004, 192). Beyond racial mixing, East Indians entered the “social space of Creole organization” through a range of other processes including intermarriage, religious conversion as well as the adoption of Creole style and tastes (Hintzen 2002, 99). While the scholars discussed here have focused on some of these avenues of creolization, Veronica Gregg (2002), Sarah Lawson Welsh (2019) and Candice Goucher (2015), among others, have extended the analysis of creolization to the sphere of food and alimentary practices.

Scholarship on creolization not only highlights avenues through which subjugated communities mixed and interacted with one another, but also underscores the necessity of attending to varying degrees of proximity and distance, acceptance and disavowal that these communities entertained towards ideas of social and cultural boundary crossing. Shona Jackson’s *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (2012) shifts the terms of the conversation to focus instead on the role and place of Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean within discourses of creolization. If Mimi Sheller summarizes becoming creole as a process of achieving indigeneity through the cultivation of attachment to a new place of belonging, Jackson’s critique illuminates one of the key modes through which such belonging is cultivated as well as its implications for displaced Indigenous Peoples in Guyana. Jackson argues that creoles (an identity category that encompasses all people of African and Indian descent in her

analysis) indigenize through claims upon land legitimized through labor. The postcolonial state, understood to be “the product of the labor of the enslaved and indentured in the Caribbean” is thus designated “an ethnic inheritance for Creoles, not for Indigenous Peoples” (2012, 4). Such a process extends the subordination of Indigenous Peoples that was foundational to the establishment of the plantation complex, in the postcolonial era. Whether descendants of enslaved peoples and indentured servants can be unequivocally called “settlers” as Jackson does, remains a fraught question. Her argument, however, is most persuasive in the way it illuminates material and ideological continuities between the colonial and postcolonial moments that center on the material and discursive erasure of Indigenous Peoples.

Not unlike Munasinghe’s critique of the representation of East Indians within discourses of creolization, Jackson too shines a light on the treatment of Indigenous Peoples and their histories in seminal works in the field. In Edward Brathwaite’s “Timehri” she sees an elaboration of the same logic of creole belonging through labor that shapes postcolonial Guyana, only this time it is intellectual labor that “secures creole belonging in the colony” (2012, 50). In this essay, Brathwaite’s analysis of African and Amerindian interculturalism is routed through a discussion of the writer Wilson Harris and artist Aubrey Williams, for whom the source of artistic inspiration was “Amerindian” and not African. Brathwaite claims that Williams’ work illuminated the “primordial nature” of Amerindian and African cultures and that spending time with the Warrau Indians had placed Williams “in a significant continuum” with their ancient art, suggesting that he was able to make it visible to others through his own work. Jackson reads in this an assertion of Creole mediation through intellectual labor—“indigenous people must be mediated by the intellectual who makes it visible in the “Word” with his intellectual labor” (2012, 50). While this section focuses primarily on critiques of the exclusion of East Indians from the conception of creole society, recent scholarship is thinking creatively through the possibilities of cultural, political, racial, and affective alliances across racialized communities beyond the lexicon of creolization.[\[3\]](#)

Creolization in the Indian Ocean World

Scholarship on creolization in the Indian Ocean reveals continuities with the Caribbean on the one hand, and on the other, demonstrates how the concept is expanded upon, revised, and transformed by the specific history of the region. While islands in the Indian Ocean world share the history of European colonization, the plantation complex, slavery, and indentureship with the Caribbean, the history of cultural exchange in the region predates the arrival of Europeans. Thus, understanding creolization in the Indian Ocean, as Françoise Vergès points out, necessitates close attention to a history of “encounter between individuals and groups already transformed by conquest and exchanges, coming from cultures as diverse as the cultures of Madagascar, the Comoros islands, Mozambique, and the south of India” (2007, 137). Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou describe Reunion Island, for instance, as one “where History has thrown together Malagasy, Africans, Comorans, Indians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Malays, Europeans and French, atheists, Catholics and Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, animists and polytheists” (2012, 6).

Not unlike islands in the Caribbean, the arrival of indentured servants on Reunion Island, their clashes with emancipated African peoples and their desire to distinguish themselves from the Black population was coterminous with their adoption of creole ways of living (Vergès 2007, 144). On the island of Mauritius (that has its own history of successive Dutch, French, and British colonization), where all inhabitants are descendants who arrived at different times over the past three centuries from France, China, Africa, Madagascar, and India, the cultures of all ethnic groups have been “culturally creolized” (Eriksen 2007, 157). The transformation of the Bhojpuri language spoken by many Indo-Mauritians, through the influence of other languages to such a degree as to be unrecognizable to modern speakers of Bhojpuri in Bihar, is one of many such examples. At the same time, the transformation of Sino-Mauritians’ religious practices to Catholicism and their language to Creole while retaining aspects of their traditional kinship organization, material culture, rituals and family ties in East Asia underscores the fact that creolization is neither static nor homogenous within or across communities. Eriksen’s

observation that despite the persistence of cultural creolization throughout Mauritian society, “it is chiefly the Mauritians of African and/or Malagasy descent who are classified locally as Creoles,” is a reminder of the gap between quotidian practices of cultural mixing and formal claims to creole identity (2007, 157). Claims like these emerge out of essentialist thinking, which in the Mauritian context takes the form of assertions by Creoles that “they are the only *vrai Mauriciens*, real Mauritians,” the only group to have emerged from the soil of Mauritius. This, while different from attempts to anchor creole identity in an African past, nonetheless is an attempt to “fix and standardize a collective identity” (174).

Claims to Creole identity are nonetheless enacted by those deemed formally outside of it through a variety of quotidian practices including speaking Kreol (Eriksen 2007, 161). In a comment reminiscent of Aisha Khan’s observations about Indians in Trinidad, Eriksen notes that Indo-Mauritian communities, especially North Indian Hindus, North Indian Muslims and Tamils continue to share a fraught relationship to Creole and Western languages such as English and French because of its perceived implications for these communities’ “cultural purity”(159). Efforts to purify cultural forms seen as “contaminated” thus contribute to cultural decreolization and the entrenchment of boundaries. Ananya Jahanara Kabir however draws attention to the fact that public memorialization projects in the Indian Ocean showcase “the arrival and assimilation of Indians and other demographic groups from Asia” (2020, 181). In this, she reads an “Indian Ocean answer to the exclusions of creolité as a Caribbean identity poetics” (182). At the same time, Kabir is careful to note the “seductive pull of the politics of populism and nativism” that have emerged from the Indian heartland and gained traction globally, including in many recognized sites of creolization (187).

Kabir’s scholarship on creolization seeks to illuminate connections between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds through close attention to cultural productions and embodied practices. For instance, in her analysis, the dance form of quadrille offers “an embodied theory of creolization” across these ocean worlds (2020, 136). More recently, Kabir (2022) has shifted the conversation on creolization from these spaces to the Indian subcontinent. While acknowledging that “creolization” is not a concept customarily applied to the material or literary culture” of India, she makes a case for “Creole Indias” as an analytical and historical category that calls attention to the littoral enclaves where dense inter-imperial exchanges happened both during and before British ascendancy in the region. Routed through an analysis of Franco-Tamil author Ari Gautier’s novel *Le thinnai*, enclaves carved out of continental littorals, such as Pondicherry, emerge as “sites where a plurality of possible agents can produce the unpredictable linguistics and social formations characteristic of creolization” (2022, 204). Excavating avenues of cultural exchange between India and the Dutch, French, Portuguese, and the Danes as well as the implications of these exchanges for Indian identity in the present currently informs Kabir’s collaboration with Gautier through the cultural platform called “Le Thinnai Kreyol” that they cofounded in 2020.

A Creolizing Globe?: Conclusion

Crucial in these conversations unfolding in different parts of the world is a deep recognition of the material conditions under which processes of creolization take place. Mintz’s call to study creole identities “comparatively and differentially” especially resonates here (1971, 487). Despite the call for situated analyses of creolization, what has often followed, Stephan Palmié argues, is a blurring of modern and historical usages of the term and its meanings, including the erasure of regional differences (2010, 53). Another troubling move away from such specificity, one that amplifies a tension between universalism and historical particularism, to use Palmié’s phrase, involves a decontextualized, generalist use of the term creolization. As Mimi Sheller points out, from the 1990s onwards creolization began to be used “to refer to *any* encounter and mixing of dislocated cultures, divorced from any connection to the legacies of transatlantic slavery and without citation of the Caribbean theorists who developed the concept” (2020, 283). She presents anthropologists Ulf Hannerz and James Clifford’s use of creolization to name contemporary processes of cultural exchange and globalization as case studies of this tendency. Palmié similarly comments on anthropologists’ tendency to extrapolate

“localized and historically situated social usages (including more restricted scholarly abstractions thereof) and elevate them to the status of generalized descriptive or analytical instruments” (2010, 50). Sheller asks,

If creolization has its origins in Caribbean cultures of resistance, in the survival of enslavement and colonial plantation systems, and in movements of decolonization, in what sense can postmodern metropolitan culture possibly share in this dynamic? (2020, 286)

This de-historicization of creolization, its consumption in mainstream culture ultimately strips it of its political edge, theoretical complexity, and its oppositional meanings (273, 284).

This essay tracks the emergence of creolization as a framework for understanding the complex processes of cultural change that accompanied and persisted beyond the colonial encounter in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean world. Vital to this conversation is the recognition of creolization as a process rather than a stable, reified identity category. If on the one hand, scholars have mobilized it to understand and critique the power dynamics that marked the colonial encounter between Africans and Europeans in the Caribbean, they have also expanded the contours of this analysis to illuminate the processes of interculturalization and perhaps even acculturation that took place between subjugated communities, such as peoples of Indian and African descent. At the same time, they have also illuminated how concepts such as creoleness have been deployed to maintain ethnic boundaries. As a vital site from where creolization has been theorized, the Indian Ocean world reveals the necessity of expanding both the conceptual frame and the temporal brackets of the concept as studied from the vantage point of the Caribbean.

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[1] Similarly, Christine Ho (1989), Joyce Johnson (1997) and Anne-Marie Lee-Loy (2010) have examined the Chinese community’s role and experience within Caribbean creole society.

[2] For extended discussions of these ordinances, see Khan (2004), Puri (2004) and Munasinghe (2006).

[3] See Goffe (2019) on Afro-Asian relations in the context of the Caribbean and Cordis (2019) on blackness and indigeneity in Guyana.

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