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Source: *Caribbean Quarterly*, March - June, 2008, Vol. 54, No. 1/2, The 60th Anniversary Edition: Literature and Ideas (March - June, 2008), pp. 81-89

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/40655153>

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Creolization in the Making of the Americas*

EDOUARD GLISSANT

Inscribed in the American landscape, opening up through it, living in and manifesting it, there is a “civilizational region,” real but long unnoticed, perhaps because it was balkanized by occidental colonizers. This is the region of the “plantation system;” composed of the West Indies and the Caribbean, the Caribbean coast of Latin America (that is to say, the coastal part of Venezuela and Colombia, which is different in many respects from the South American Andes), the Guyanas, the northeastern part of Brazil, and part of the southern United States. It is connected to Mexico and Central America, whose West Indian character is obvious both in Panama and in Belize. The boundaries of Panama and Belize define a more extended area, between South America, of which these countries form a part, and North America.

Some call this region the “Mediterranean of the Americas;” but this parallel seems vague. Historically, the spinning, revolving movement of the cultures that have lived on its edges have made the Mediterranean a concentrating sea. All around it, the contacts and conflicts between cities and ethnic groups have gradually led to the reality of the Imperium (that is, the inland sea of the Romans) and to the concept of the One. The Mediterranean certainly cannot be considered a monolithic entity; it has generated, given birth to, the nations and the nationalism of a large part of Europe. Nevertheless, its cultural diversities, through osmosis and successive conflicts, have given rise to a universalizing expression of rationality or spirituality. It is not a coincidence that most of the principal monotheistic religions (Hebrew, Christian, Islamic) appeared there and were in opposition to each other.

By contrast, and in accordance with the same revolving movement of contacts and conflicts, the Caribbean Sea is the sea that “diffracts.” Since 1492, it has been a preface to the continent (in the seventeenth century, it was sometimes known as the Sea of Peru), a place of passage, of transience rather than exclusion, an archipelago-like reality, which does not imply the intense entrenchment of a self-sufficient thinking of identity, often sectarian, but of relativity, the fabric of a great expanse, the relational complicity with the new earth and sea. It does not tend toward the One, but opens out onto diversity.

The concept of diversity, which expressed itself as one of the poetic dreams of the expanding Occident, and simultaneously as an antidote to the universal empire that this expansion subsumed, is an immediate, real-life experience of the people in the area I mention here —no longer a dream nor an aspiration, but for them, a firsthand, basic reality.

These people were both deported and imported: the natives of the islands Caribs and Arawaks - were all slaughtered, except for a tiny handful at present living in a reservation on the Dominican Island. At the same time, the slave trade brought to the Caribbean the determining factor of the African population. This experience of diversity, and the long-unnoticed process it spawned, I label “creolization.” Creolization is not an uprooting, a loss of sight, a suspension of being. Transience is not wandering. Diversity is not dilution.

When we speak about creolization, we do not mean only *métissage*: crossbreeding, because creolization adds something new to the components that participate in it. Why do we use this term? It refers to the Creole languages, and we must now examine the reasons for this. In our search for the explanation, we must distinguish between creole languages, pidgin, and dialect, but without applying any hierarchical notions to these distinctions.

A creole language is not a type of pidgin. A pidgin language plays with the elements of one language, and disturbs them, lexically and syntactically. The principal characteristic of a pidgin form of communication is its aggressive treatment of the language in which the pidgin forms appear. This is the case, for example, in the language of rap music in the United States or the inventions of dub poetry in Jamaica, which depart from the regular or standard English language.

A pidgin differs from a dialect in two respects: First, it is often possible to find out who invented or proposed a pidgin; second, it is a kind of language that appears (and may disappear) very quickly or suddenly. In view of these characteristics, pidgin cannot be considered part of the process of dialectization, which is a long, non-individual result of the practice of a language by a community. In any case, a pidgin, unlike a dialect, is activated by an aggressive intention, usually for self-defence.

A creole language, in contrast, does not work within one but almost always two languages or two fields of language, which are its components. For example, the francophone Creole languages of the West Indies, still spoken today by francophone or anglophone people (in Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia or Dominican Island), consist of fragments of syntax from sub-Saharan West Africa and a lexicon brought to these shores by the francophone Normans and

British sailors. As long as a creole language continues to combine the forms of two (or more) linguistic traditions, the product of this synthesis is a new kind of expression, a supplement to the two (or more) original roots, or series of roots, from which this creole language was born.

Thus it is easy to see why creolization, and not *métissage* or crossbreeding, accurately describes the process originated by the contacts and conflicts of cultures in the countries being discussed here. Creolization is unpredictable, whereas the immediate results of crossbreeding are more or less predictable. Furthermore, creolization opens on a radically new dimension of reality, not on a mechanical combination of components, characterized by value percentages. Therefore, creolization, which overlaps with linguistic production, does not produce direct synthesis, but *résultantes*, results: something else, another way.

Suppose that one were to define the ethnic groups in the United States and to determine how many constitute the unity-diversity of this nation: Anglo-Protestant, Irish, Italian, Jewish, Afro-American, the Native American, and so on. It becomes clear that creolization is not at work here. The ethnic groups live side by side. The unity of such a country refers to the way of life, the ideals, the political or economic community they all embrace. Thus, one can be American and Irish, American and Jewish, or black and American, native and American, and so on. Today, of course, almost everyone agrees about the distinction that I am about to discuss. But I want to emphasize that twenty or thirty years ago, writers and researchers, as different as the Brazilian Darcy Ribeyro (working in Portuguese), the Mexican Guillermo Bonfil Battalla (in Spanish), the Jamaican Rex Nettleford (in English), and myself (in Creole and French), agreed early on about the following distinction regarding the Americas:

People-witnesses, who have always been there: the American Indians, from South to North-this part that we label Meso-America.

People-transshipped, who maintained themselves quite as they had been before they arrived: in this category we find Canada, the United States, and to some extent Chile and Argentina-this is a Euro-America.

People born as a result of creolization: Brazil, the Caribbean, the Caribbean coast of South America, part of Central America -that is to say, Plantation-America, or Neo-America.

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The problem today for the people-witnesses is to survive, that is to say, to try to maintain their identity, in the face of the alienation imposed by the conqueror, the conquistador or his actual descendants. The problem for the Euro-Americans is to conciliate their different and preserved identities within the national entities they have built, without breaking these entities. The problem for plantation American people is to give legitimacy to this new dimension of human nature they constitute, this dimension of exchange and mutual change, in a world in which apartheid and racism still rule and dominate.

But, whatever classification is employed to understand our world, and regardless of its usefulness, reality always extends beyond its parameters. Meso-America is, once again, operating in the United States, a Euro-American land, where Native Americans are reorganizing themselves. This Meso-America literally “comes into” Plantation-America, in Central America, for example. And a country like Venezuela has a tripartite culture, with the three Americas working in it. The complexity of our reality confounds all formal analysis.

Perhaps creolization is becoming one of our present-day goals. It seems clear that many of us are discarding the old formal categories, with the following questions or alternatives: Is an ethnic identity necessary or indispensable to the equilibrium of women and men living in a community? If so, how can a person preserve his or her identity without blindly rejecting the others? Furthermore, can we not imagine a new dimension of identity, open to the truth, or simply the presence of the Other? An identity that would not be the projection of a unique and sectarian root, but of what we call a rhizome, a root with a multiplicity of extensions, in all directions? Not killing what is around it, as a unique root would, but establishing communication and relation? It seems to me that man’s mind, and especially his imagination, must assume this challenge, not only on behalf of the Americas but of the entire world. And if one says that that is a utopian ideal, it should be remembered that no change in human history has occurred without utopian ideals.

Nevertheless, this “open” idea of identity at first did not seem to have much chance of expanding in the universe of plantations, where creolization was born. Certainly, absolute separation was the rule on the plantation. Not only an absolute social separation, but also an irremediable break between forms of sensibility, despite their being changed by each other. The French poet Saint-John Perse and the American novelist William Faulkner, two authors emerging from the universe of plantations, give us the opportunity to appreciate this split. We recall the famous

description of the people (meaning the black people) of Guadeloupe, the island where the poet was born and which he left when he was thirteen years old, in Saint-John Perse's *Eloges*! "But for a long time yet to come my memory is of soundproof faces, the color of papaya and boredom, that stood behind our chairs like dead stars."

This papaya and this boredom – literally re-ification – do not so much reveal the poet's indifference as they emphasize the radical separation, the impossible apartheid, that ruled over the palpable existence of the plantation. By the same token, Faulkner, who spoke of blacks so frequently, never set out on one of those monologues that he wrote so skillfully and so powerfully depicting characters who were black. He did risk doing so for a number of mulatto characters and in a tour de force that has become a classic, he even did so for Benjy, the idiot at the beginning of *The Sound and the Fury*. The black character, Lucas, though he is the hero of *Intruder in the Dust*, is never interiorized by Faulkner. He is described entirely through postures and actions, a silhouette brought to perfection against the horizon. *Intruder in the Dust* is not a novel of essence but rather a novel of phenomeno-logical description. Faulkner, moreover, writes in this same novel – a propos of the southern Black: "I don't know him at all, and from what it seems, no white man knows him." It is as though the brilliant novelist, not surprisingly rejected by his own class, and at the same time misunderstood by the black Americans having access to his work, sensed here an impossibility brought to a head by history. This is where the break occurs in all of its force.

But this break has not defined territories in which different strata of the population are to be confined for eternity. The claim that groups are mutually extraneous did not prevent their mutual contamination, which was inevitable within the plantation enclosure. We see that Saint-John Perse transformed the poetics of the French language by introducing the genius of Creole, even if he tried to hide this. And what is this universe that Faulkner invented and described if not that of the extended family, inextricable, so different from the western pattern, so rooted in an African memory? And what is the question that the works of Faulkner are tragically debating, if not this? Who is the real son of the South – the Indian who was dispossessed of it, the white man who conquered it, or the black people who suffered on it? For example, no matter how cold-blooded and fierce the thought of Father Labat, the chronicler of the Antilles in the seventeenth century, one sees an underlying curiosity-fixed, troubled, and obsessive – every time there is a question about the slaves that he is struggling to pacify. Fear, fantasies, and perhaps a scant flicker of complicity, are the undercurrent to rebellions and

repressions. The long catalogue of martyrs is also a long, slow creolization, whether involuntary or deliberate.

The discourse on the plantation followed in the same way, with the same apparent ambiguity. Ambiguity was the first necessity for survival. In the silent universe of the plantation, oral expression, the only one possible for slaves, was organized in a discontinuous manner. The appearance of tales, proverbs, sayings, songs, in the creolophone world as much as in any other, bears the mark of this discontinuity. The texts here seem to neglect what Western realism was able to cover so well: landscapes, scenery, customs, well-motivated descriptions of characters. One hardly ever finds events and daily gestures related concretely, but, on the other hand, one discovers a symbolic evocation of situations. It is as though these texts worked hard for a disguise behind the symbol, to tell without telling. This is what I have elsewhere called the practice of *detours*; and this is where discontinuity is struggling; the same discontinuity that will be put into action by that other detour that we know as *marronage*.

What we have here is a form of literature that strives to express that which it is forbidden to designate, and finds, against this organic censoring, risky ways every time. The oral literature of the plantations, as a result, is akin to other subsistence – that is, survival-techniques set up by the slaves and their immediate descendants. The perpetual need to get around the rule of silence creates a literature that is not naturally continuous, but that bursts forth in fragments. The storyteller is the odd-job man, the *djobeur*; as we say in Martinique, of the collective soul.

Although that is a general phenomenon throughout the system, in creolophone areas it is more obvious and easier to see. The reason is that, in addition to this necessity for circumvention, creole language contributes another, internal, necessity: that is, the obligation to remake oneself every time on the basis of a series of forgettings. Forgetting, that is to say, integration, of what the language is based upon: the multitude of African languages, on the one hand, and of European languages, on the other —the nostalgia for what is left of the Caribs. The linguistic development of creolization has proceeded through the settling of these layered contributions, and the resulting synthesis has never been fixed in its terms, despite having asserted the durability of its structures from the beginning. In other words, the Creole language has never professed to be an authoritative edict, that one could use as a basis for tracking down a linguistic development, where another text comes to perfect the previous one, and so forth. I do not know if this diffraction (where, perhaps, multilingualism is really at work for one of the

first times in humanity's history) is characteristic of every language during its formation –for example, one would have to look at the European Middle Ages with this in mind-or if it is completely attributable to the specific situation of the plantation in the Caribbean Islands and other places in the area.

To this ambiguity and discontinuity of the creolization process, we can add another characteristic. It becomes clearer when we examine the pattern of settlement in the Americas.

Whether in Euro- or Neo-America, this settlement proceeded by waves, bringing three kinds of new people: (a) the armed migrant, emerging with all his furniture from the flanks of the *Mayflower*, who built the economic power of the Northern Americas; (b) the household migrant, arriving with his kitchen ranges, his family pictures, perhaps a business ability (he provided the labour in the North, but even where he had built great financial empires, he remained dependent on the economic power of the first group); and (c) the naked migrant, that is to say, the African deported by the Middle Passage, arriving with only traces of his original country and his languages, and with the difficult and progressively vanished memory of his gods (he provided all the labour in the South).

The striking characteristic of this last group is that it was obliged to rebuild various cultures – in Brazil, in the Caribbean, and in other parts of the area of creolization – by proceeding not from preserved folklores (as did the Irish or Italian people in the North), but from these traces, and by combining them with countless other elements, from China or India or the Middle East, and so on, with so many conflicts to resolve. By accomplishing a real integration in this area, giving birth to a new dimension of being, this “obligation” gave to the creolization process another new dimension, that of opening ways.

Imagining and recreating from traces of memory removes a person far away from systems, far away not only from ideological thinking but even more from the thought of any imperative system. I would like to emphasize this point: imagining from and by traces is a more difficult but more fruitful exercise than thinking by systems. It seems that the ancient marronage, which was the quest for new traces, is once again operating, for all of us. In other words, ambiguity, discontinuity, traces, and remembering, creolization, with its unpredictable results, are not signs of weakness. They contribute to this unprecedented conception of identity that I have been discussing. They counter the massive assertions of the thinking associated with the Conquest. It is not a coincidence that so many people in the West Indies dedicated themselves to the Other: for example, the Jamaican Marcus

Garvey in the United States, or the Trinidadian Padmore in Ghana, or the Martinican Fanon in Algeria. Open and strong identity is also a strong solidarity.

Creolization still has its legitimacy. It helps us to understand that multilingualism is not a passport to impotence, as some have said, and helps us to emphasize that each language dying in the world is dying in us and with us, with a part of our imaginary order, even if we had never known about this language; that multiculturalism is not disorder, not extinction; that we can escape from the jail of History (with a capital "H") and put together our histories (without this capital "H"); that we can imagine diffracted times coming together, without this imperial linear conception of time that Columbus brought with him.

Creolization creates a new land before us, and in this process of creation, it helps us to liberate Columbus from himself. Trying to realize the absolute unity of the universe (meaning the earth) and of mankind (meaning Western man's concept of mankind), Columbus found irreducible diversity surviving under massacre. Let us help him achieve the voyage. Columbus will be whom and what we will be able to do and to create in the field of nonsectarian, nonmetaphysical, and nonabsolute communication and relation.

During my stay in Louisiana, I have had the opportunity to observe some of the concrete manifestations of such a creolization. I spoke, in Creole, with an old black lady in the city of Lafayette. She was a descendant of black people who had arrived from Santo Domingo at the time of the Haitian revolution. So there is a population of black francophone Creoles in this area, who still protect, or try to protect their peculiarity. This is not unlike the case of the black Indians around New Orleans. Their community is hard to approach; they fiercely protect an isolation that probably resulted from their history as black people who gave themselves to marronage and melted into the Indian background. Zydeco music is another case, an encounter of Cajun songs (expelled from the deep countries of France to Acadia to Louisiana's bayous) and of the rhythms of the blues and black music.

Although the plantation has vanished, creolization is still at work in our *megalopolises*, from Mexico City to Miami, from Los Angeles to Caracas, from Sao Paulo to Kingston, from New Orleans to San Juan, where the inferno of cement slums is merely an extension of the inferno of the sugarcane or cotton fields. All the Americas contain microcultures, where pidgin becomes creole, where creoles return to pidgin ways, where languages are emerging or dying, where the old and rigid sense of identity is confronting the new and open way of

creolization. This phenomenon probably has no political or economic power. But it is precious for mankind's imagination, its capacity for invention.

Dare we suppose that there are some places that I shall call Archipelago places (in the Caribbean, in the Pacific, and in so many other areas, perhaps including the new Mediterranean, growing up today) —where such a concept of the Relative, of the open links with the Other, of what I call a *Poétique de la Relation* shades or moderates the splendid and triumphant voice of what I call Continental thinking, the thought of systems? Most certainly, we cannot and must not propose any model, any pattern, available for all. But in such diffracted places – in these “labouratories” of chaos, which are metaphors of our chaos-infested world – let us say that chaos is beautiful; not chaos born from hate and wars, but from the extraordinary complexity of the exchange between cultures, which may yet forge future Americas that are at last and for the first time both deeply unified and truly diversified.

Note:

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