

# Introduction

## *Creolization as Cultural Creativity*

—ROBERT BARON AND ANA C. CARA

Creolization is cultural creativity in process. When cultures come into contact, expressive forms and performances emerge from their encounter, embodying the sources that shape them yet constituting new and different entities. Fluid in their adaptation to changing circumstances and open to multiple meanings, Creole forms are expressions of culture in transition and transformation. Even as these emergent forms persist and become institutionalized after initial culture contact, they continue to embody multiplicity, render multivocality, and negotiate contestation while also serving as means of national identity and creative expression. Traditionally most closely associated with the New World cultures of Caribbean and Latin American Creole societies, creolization is now increasingly viewed as a universal process that occurs anywhere cultures encounter one another. This process is especially marked in folklore as well as other kinds of expressive culture, explored in this volume through essays by folklorists, cultural anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and literary scholars.

The concept of creolization was first formulated through the study of languages in colonial situations—especially in the Americas—where people who met speaking mutually unintelligible tongues developed a linguistic medium to communicate among themselves. They restructured the existing languages of the colonizers and colonized, creating new Creole languages with distinctive phonology, morphology, and syntax (see Baker and Mühlhäusler 2007, 102). The emergence of languages, deeply expressive of their corresponding new cultures, pointed not only to new cultural forms but to new power relations and aesthetic dimensions. Both the new languages and new expressive forms embodied resistance to domination and asymmetrical power relations, thus creating and expressing a new, distinct way of being in the world. In response, the study of creolization offered a critical way of conceptualizing the emergence of cultural

phenomena borne out of the necessity to negotiate cultural differences and to resist dominance by asserting a new local voice. Today, in the post-colonial world, “Creole” has become a powerful marker of identity in Latin America, the Caribbean, southern Louisiana, Cape Verde, and islands of the southwest Indian Ocean. As “creoleness,” “*créolité*,” or “*criollismo*,” it is uniquely manifested through local as well as national expressions.<sup>1</sup> We also contend in this volume that creolization is a potent vehicle for cultural analysis while acknowledging that these premises are contested by some scholars—as we discuss below.

In keeping with the dialogic nature of culture contact in Creole societies, creole forms are never static. Their protean nature continuously adjusts to their immediate interactive context, improvising as they adjust to new situations. Creolization can thus liberate us conceptually from a notion of fixed or “finished” products in culture, whether purportedly “hybrid” or whole. We are freed to focus on cultures in transition, allowing us to grasp the “in-betweens,” the ambiguous spaces where cultural boundaries blur and disappear as hierarchical categories collapse into each other. At these interstices in creole societies, groups and individuals combine and restructure cultural entities, thus imagining and formulating Creole expressive forms that defy placement within external analytical categories.

This dynamism in Creole communities, and the impossibility of absolute cultural transparency in favor of fluidity, blurring, and obfuscation, led in the past to the characterization of Creole forms and behavior by outsiders as “impure” (see Szwed, this volume). Too often, Creole expressions have been viewed as manifestations of fragmentation and degeneration, thereby suffering in comparison to supposedly fully formed, reified, and historically sanctioned expressions of a colonial or “Westernized” elite. In sharp contrast, creolists see creolization as creative disorder, as a poetic chaos, thereby challenging simplistic and static notions of center and periphery. The cultural and critical lens of creolization, in other words, allows us to see not simply hybrids of limited fluidity, abstracted from human agency, but new cultures in the making.

Creolization is most vividly manifested and represented in the expressive forms and artistic behaviors of everyday and ceremonial life as folklore. Although creole forms have often become the symbols and instruments of nationalist interests and particular political agendas, the actuality of Creole folklore in lived experience demonstrates that creolization cannot be reduced to an artificial construct, singularly imposed from above by the post-colonial nation state. Everywhere you look in the Caribbean, much

of Latin America, southern Louisiana, and the southwest Indian Ocean region, you will find creolized musics, foods, hairstyles, verbal arts, sports, dances, customary behaviors, belief systems, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, material culture, and so much more, thereby rendering idle the question, “Why study creolization?” Jazz, salsa, or calypso; ways of worshipping and making sense of the world through Santería or Vodou; Old World pastries filled with New World fruits and Creole gumbos; the tango, the mambo, the samba; shotgun houses and vernacular architecture informed by Gothic and Baroque models rendered in tropical versions; not to mention the emergence of formerly unheard languages and the verbal art that creolization brings into being—these only begin to eloquently answer this question. To attempt to name all of the expressive manifestations of creolity would fail as an enterprise. For, in every Creole society, writers and artists of all kinds continuously create works of art grounded in, and infused with, Creole expressive culture.

In the expressive interaction shaping Creole forms, a diverse repertoire of strategies are put into play that characterize Creole intercourse: reversals, carnivalization, improvisation, mimicry, obfuscation, double-talk, feigned submission, and many other maneuvers, tactics, and schemes designed to steal power away from “top-down” monolithic impositions. The creolization process is marked by multivocal play throughout a society’s cultural manifestations, making possible, as Derek Walcott has indicated, the creation of new expressive forms unlike anything the world had ever seen! (Walcott 1974, 9).

To understand creolization, we must see it on its own terms, recognize its inner workings, and comprehend how it is conceptualized by native scholars, creolist literati, and everyday culture bearers. Indeed, we must recognize that there is no one creolity or single way of being Creole, as several of the contributors to this volume observe, but rather unique creole manifestations that express and represent creole communities around the globe, thereby underscoring the emic dimension of Creole cultures and their expressive forms. Though the creolization process and the dynamics of creolization have common features across the world, each Creole community or nation is shaped and conditioned by different local colonial and post-colonial histories, demography, geography, politics, economics, religious forces, and other influences.

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