

FORUM

Creolization as Method

Anca Parvulescu¹  and Manuela Boatcă²

¹Washington University in St Louis and ²University of Freiburg
Email: ancaparvulescu@wustl.edu

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“What took place in the Caribbean,” writes Édouard Glissant, “which could be summed up in the word *creolization*, approximates the idea of Relation as nearly as possible.”¹ For Glissant, the word *creolization* condenses the history of the Caribbean. This is a history characterized by trans-border connections, culture flows, and the transregional movement of people and capital.² As the first region to be colonized by Europe in the sixteenth century and the last one to be—incompletely—decolonized in the twentieth, the Caribbean has been shaped by the worldwide demand and supply of colonial labor. It was the destination of nearly half of all the enslaved Africans trafficked into the New World between 1492 and the end of the nineteenth century; of significant numbers of indentured and contracted European laborers during much of the same period; as well as of indentured Indian, Chinese, and Indonesian workers after the formal abolition of slavery at the end of the nineteenth century.³ Subsequently, the first half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a circuit of intra-regional migration of a labor force to the larger Caribbean islands where US-led corporations operated. After World War II, when labor from the non-independent territories of the Caribbean was recruited to rebuild the postwar

¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 34.

² Nina Glick Schiller, “Theorizing about and beyond Transnational Processes,” in *Caribbean Migration to Western Europe and the United States: Essays on Incorporation, Identity, and Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 18; Sidney W. Mintz, “The Localization of Anthropological Practice: From Area Studies to Transnationalism,” *Critique of Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (1998): 117–33.

³ Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007); Sidney W. Mintz, *Three Ancient Colonies: Caribbean Themes and Variations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Margarita Cervantes-Rodríguez, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Eric Mielants, eds., *Caribbean Migration to Western Europe and the United States: Essays on Incorporation, Identity, and Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009).

economies of western Europe and the United States, the region turned into a source of transcontinental emigration.⁴ On account of this history, the Caribbean has been theorized in terms of transculturation, creolization, and hybridity; concepts such as “remittance societies,” “circular migration,” or “diaspora,” widely used in transnational studies, have also been coined in relation to the Caribbean.⁵ More than these other terms, however, the concept of creolization has come to condense both the sedimentation and ramifications of this history.

Importantly, at the same time as he firmly places the term in the Caribbean, Glissant proposes it as an anchor for framing the world as a unit of analysis. Caribbean creolization metonymizes a process of worlding: “The Caribbean, as far as I am concerned, may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly, one of the explosive regions where it seems to be gathering strength.”⁶ For Glissant, the Caribbean functions as an alternative to the Mediterranean, the space considered an exemplary world by historians of the *Annales* School. Entangled with the history of the Caribbean, which both renders it visible and gives it force, creolization “diffracts,” opening up a connected world.⁷ Relation, which Glissant imagines as a process, names this connectedness.

In *Poetics of Relation*, written as an elaboration and synthesis of his previous work, Glissant defines the term *creolization* (*créolisation*) through its affinities and distinction from both *creoleness* (*créolité*) and *métissage*. Creolization extends both *créolité* and *métissage* into a world. It applies to a broader geography than *créolité*; and it expands the purview of racial *métissage* (“creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*”).⁸ Glissant thus imagines creolization as a form of traveling theory.⁹ It starts in the Caribbean and gets its energies from the Caribbean, but it also opens up the world, functioning as a mode of worlding.¹⁰ As such, it models what Glissant conceives of as “our modernity,” a revision of the concept of the modern produced by the European Enlightenment.

What is the cultural geography of this world? Glissant mentions the Indian Ocean, a creolized world region to which the term travels most smoothly. In this context, the term has been picked up and developed by Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou, who write about Réunion: “an island of the Creole world,

⁴ Cervantes-Rodríguez, Grosfoguel, and Mielants, *Caribbean Migration to Western Europe and the United States*.

⁵ Mintz, “The Localization of Anthropological Practice”; Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 33.

⁷ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 33.

⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34. Glissant is distinguishing between creolization and creoleness—the latter as defined by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité*, trans. M. B. Taleb-Khyar (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

⁹ Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory,” in *The Selected Works of Edward Said, 1966–2006*, eds. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 2019), 197–219.

¹⁰ On worlding, see Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

on the route between Africa and Asia, a ‘French’ island, an island-archipelago. It is an island of the Indian Ocean world, an island of Indian-oceanic creolizations.”¹¹ Ananya Jahanara Kabir has worked on transoceanic creolization with a focus on Creole Indias, from Goa and Pondicherry on the Indian subcontinent to Elmina on the coast of Africa.¹² From here, the editors of the *Creolization Reader* trace the movement and inflections of the term to other parts of the world.¹³

More recently, creolization has been enlisted in an effort to redefine Europe and Europeanness.¹⁴ The history supporting the travels of the concept to the European context should not need explaining: western Europe and the Caribbean have seen cycles of historical entanglements since colonial times; the two regions should be understood in a relational framework. As it relates to the former colonial metropolis, creolization foregrounds the fact that ethnicity and race do not represent new categories of analysis in Europe, only ones that have recently gained more sociological visibility in the European West as the geopolitical core of knowledge production. The project of creolizing Europe therefore entails the incorporation of the Caribbean experience of an extractive plantation economy based on the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and interregional migration into the history of modern industrial Europe. Although the European continent has seen multiple waves of migration, it was only with the postwar recruitment of migrant labor and the aftermath of administrative decolonization in the early 1960s that Europe came to be seen as “more of an arrival hall than a departure lounge for intercontinental migration.”¹⁵ At this time, most western European states became recipients of large migrant populations, from recently decolonized African states and from dictatorial states in Latin America. Several waves of unskilled labor migrants contracted by government policies of postwar economic reconstruction from adjacent or formerly colonized countries followed; and, after 1990, hundreds of thousands of eastern European war refugees. Creolization—a geographically and historically specific process related to the mass movement of people and goods from Europe and Africa to the Americas and

¹¹ Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou, “Moorings: Indian Ocean Creolizations,” *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9 (June 29, 2012).

¹² Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “Elmina as Postcolonial Space: Transoceanic Creolization and the Fabric of Memory,” *Interventions* 22, no. 8 (2020): 994–1012; Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “Rapsodia Ibero-Indiana: Transoceanic Creolization and the Mando of Goa,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 55, no. 5 (2021) 1581–1636. Some of these ideas were developed in collaboration with the author Ari Gautier on their online platform *le thinnai kreyol* (May 2020–May 2022).

¹³ Robin Cohen and Paola Toninato, *The Creolization Reader: Studies in Mixed Identities and Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁴ Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Shirley Anne Tate, *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2017); Manuela Boatcă, “Inequalities Unbound: Transnational Processes and The Creolization of Europe,” in *Postcoloniality-Decoloniality-Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, eds. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 211–30; Manuela Boatcă, “Thinking Europe Otherwise: Lessons from the Caribbean,” *Current Sociology* 69, no. 3 (2021): 389–414.

¹⁵ Göran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945–2000* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 41.

the creation of new cultures and peoples in the plantation contact zones—thus acquired currency in the context of debates about transnationalism and globalization studies, including in Europe. According to anthropologist Sidney Mintz, it is important to remember that this expansion of the term is anchored in the fact that “the world has now become a macrocosm of what the Caribbean region was in the sixteenth century.”¹⁶ Far from being an instance of historical particularism concerning one specific world region and one unique socioeconomic context, the Caribbean encompassed transborder processes and transregional entanglements at a “theoretically inconvenient time.”¹⁷ When employed as a method, creolization frames both the historicized singularity and global reach of these processes.

It is on this analytical path that, in search for a critical framework that effectively creolizes the predominantly “ethnic lens” of methodological nationalism in the study of East Europe, we have come to use the term in the title of our recent book, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires*.¹⁸ In the context of a project aimed at revisiting and reframing one of Europe’s peripheral regions, Transylvania, creolization has helped us critically frame a number of neglected and marginalized relational configurations in the history of a region on the periphery of European empires. In our book, creolization maps an inter-imperial predicament that witnessed multiple and heterogeneous empires (Habsburg, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian) vying for control of the region.¹⁹ The scope of the notion of creolization allows us to offer an analysis of the relations of power that tie coloniality and inter-imperiality, the integration of overseas colonial projects and intra-European imperial rivalries. It concomitantly helps articulate a unique ethnic and racial field against the background of Transylvania’s political economy. In this context, neoserfdom, or what Immanuel Wallerstein analyzed as a novel form of capitalist labor control that he termed “coerced cash-crop labor,” was entangled with the enslaved labor of the Roma population in neighboring Moldavia and Wallachia, whose history has long been absent from comparative analyses of coerced labor. Not a plantation economy in technical terms, the enslavement of the Roma was a regime of coerced labor that created long-term racializations and creative forms of resistance. In our project, we challenge the dominant tendencies of romanticizing the Roma populations and the economy of mobility that often frames their labor.²⁰ Only recently

¹⁶ Mintz, “The Localization of Anthropological Practice,” 120.

¹⁷ Mintz, “The Localization of Anthropological Practice,” 124.

¹⁸ Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022). On methodological nationalism, see Anna Amelina et al., eds., *Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Research Methodologies for Cross-Border Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁹ On the concept of inter-imperiality, see Laura Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

²⁰ In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant invokes the affinity between native populations in the Caribbean and what he calls “circus people”: “The nomadism practiced by populations that move from one part of the forest to another, by the Arawak communities who navigated from island to island in the Caribbean, by circus people [*des gens du Cirque*] in their peregrinations from village to village” (12).

recognized as part of the Indian diaspora, the Roma's *longue durée* history of mobility offers instead an arc of relation to both India and the Caribbean.

At the same time, the notion of creolization helps us understand Transylvanian practices of intermarriage and prohibitions thereof, as well as questions pertaining to reproductive labor.²¹ In this sense, we are aligned with Kabir when she writes: "The creolized culture that emerges typically manifests itself on the body and domestic habitus, merging the intangible with the material, evading standardization and marketisation, and proliferating orally and ephemerally."²² Questions of gender are often entangled with creolization's promises and, for some, with its threats. In a region like Transylvania, with high rates of inter-ethnic and interracial intermarriage but with little discussion of such mixing, the perceived threat of creolization has historically led to strict controls of women's virginity and the toleration of a culture of violence against women.

Adjacent to issues of gender are questions of secularity in Transylvania, a region known for multiple religions (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), cyclical waves of conversion tied to religious imperial hierarchies and local nationalisms, and a complex concept of religious toleration (Transylvania is credited with the invention of the modern concept of toleration). In the context of debates about the postsecular, creolization renders visible the entanglement of what we used to call religious syncretism (the formation of the Catholic Orthodox Church in Transylvania, for example) and inter-imperiality (in this case, the interests of the Habsburg Empire vying with Russian and Greek Orthodoxy). In turn, local nationalisms, like Romanian Transylvanian nationalism, enlist a purportedly homogeneous and therefore decreolized religion in their claims to the spirituality of the nation.

Centrally, here and elsewhere, the term *creolization* maps a multilingual terrain. As Glissant reminds us, "Creolization carries along then into the adventure of multilingualism and into the incredible explosion of cultures."²³ In our study of Transylvania across empires, we foreground how local languages (Romanian, Hungarian, German, Yiddish, Romani, Armenian) inflected one another. Here and elsewhere, creolization is confronting the forces of monolingualism or, in the case of Transylvania, serial monolingual paradigms.²⁴ Glissant emphasizes that multilingual creolization anchors a poetics: "The poetics of Relation requires all the languages of the world. Not to know or to ponder them, but to know (feel) that it is essential for them to exist. That this existence determines the accents of any writing."²⁵ Within literary studies, the concept of

²¹ Ioana Szeman, "Black and White Are One': Anti-Amalgamation Laws, Roma Slaves, and the Romanian Nation on the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Moldavian Stage," in *Uncle Tom's Cabins: The Transnational History of America's Most Mutable Book*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Stefka Mihaylova (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

²² Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "Activating Pondicherry Creole: Conversations on Method," *Third Text Online*, forthcoming 2023.

²³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34.

²⁴ On the monolingual paradigm, see Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

²⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 214.

creolization therefore functions as a reminder that writers in creolized spaces write with a deep awareness of multilingualism. This framework allows us to reframe the work of the most canonical Transylvanian author, Liviu Rebreanu, for a hundred years understood in Romanian nationalist terms, as creolized—multilingually accented. Keeping in mind the warning that creolization does not happen on the basis of equality, we account for the shape unequal negotiations and hierarchies take in the inter-imperial context of Transylvania by referring to the region's multilingualism as interglottism—a sedimentation of inter-imperiality in the linguistic realm: Rebreanu wrote in multiple languages, before he settled on Romanian, which he had to relearn. Seen through the lens of creolization, the most canonical Romanian novel, a pillar of Romanian nationalist literary criticism, becomes legible as a text written in multiple, unequal languages at the intersection of a number of empires.

As a force of worlding, creolization names a *relation* to other “translated societies”—to use Stuart Hall's phrase—around the world, centrally the Caribbean.²⁶ In 1877, the first journal of comparative literature appeared in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, the capital of Transylvania. Alongside it emerged a notion of comparatism anchored in a policy of multilingualism meant to disguise factual interglottism—inter-imperial linguistic hierarchies and inequality. Positioning Transylvania as a creolized space thus also serves the project of rethinking the contemporary discipline of comparative literature and comparatism more generally. The concept of creolization helps build a bridge toward what Shu-mei Shih, in dialogue with Glissant, calls “comparison as relation”—the critical act of revealing hidden relations in world history.²⁷ Instead of a model of world literature anchored in diffusion (first in Europe, then elsewhere, on a pattern of mixing form and content), we might think of world literature as creolized literature.²⁸

What happens, then, to creolization as an analytical lens when it travels?²⁹ As we have seen, in the Caribbean, the term is associated with a labor regime and its modes of inequality: “The Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation,” writes Glissant.³⁰ As it travels, there is a risk of the concept's embeddedness in the plantation economy and its racial hierarchies being lost or muted. Tied to this risk are broader questions of power. “Creolization,” writes Hall, “always entails inequality, hierarchization, issues of domination and subalternity, mastery and servitude, control and resistance. Questions of *power*, as well as questions of *entanglement*, are always at stake. It is important to keep these contradictory tendencies together, rather than singling

²⁶ Stuart Hall, “Créolité and the Process of Creolization,” in *The Creolization Reader: Studies in Mixed Identities and Cultures*, eds. Robin Cohen and Paola Toninato (London: Routledge, 2010), 29.

²⁷ Shu-mei Shih, “Comparison as Relation,” in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, eds. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

²⁸ On diffusion, see Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.

²⁹ For a critique of the extension of the term beyond the Caribbean, see Stephan Palmié, “Creolization and Its Discontents,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 433–56.

³⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 65.

out their celebratory aspects.”³¹ Does creolization as a traveling theory risk minimizing power as an organizing feature in its conceptual constellation? “There is no creolization without loss,” Vergès and Marimoutou emphasize. These are reminders that creolization should not be romanticized; it has been and remains a mode of transformation and creativity premised on the unequal power relations that characterize modernity/coloniality/inter-imperiality—dispossession, colonization, violence, and enslavement—and their afterlives.

Methodologically, our project in *Creolizing the Modern* involves replacing any of the multiple ethnic lenses that have claimed Transylvania for a national project with the framework of multiethnic and multilingual becoming across empires. The exercise necessarily relies on “creolizing theory” by retrieving subaltern histories and experiences both in colonial and imperial situations and reinscribing them into literary and social theory. Creolizing Transylvania therefore represents an instance of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih call “the becoming theory of the minor”—thinking through and with invizibilized, peripheral, or subaltern formations.”³² Creolization thus functions as a method of weaving the experiences of former colonies, imperial peripheries, and racialized populations into the analysis of past and current processes. In the long run, the creolization of theory will hopefully lead to the creolization of institutions. One such institution, shaped by the colonial logic of preventing undesirable migration and countered by the enslaved and subordinated populations’ long-standing struggles for rights, is citizenship.³³ Another such institution is indeed literature, as imagined by Glissant: “literary production—first as an act of survival, then as a dead end or illusion, finally as an effort or passion of memory.”³⁴

Author biography

Anca Parvulescu is a professor of English and Liselotte Dieckmann Professor of Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis. She is the author of *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (2010), *The Traffic in Women’s Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe* (2014) and *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (coauthored with Manuela Boatcă, 2022). Her work focuses on international modernism, literary and critical theory, East European studies, and theories of comparatism.

Manuela Boatcă is a professor of sociology and the Head of School of the Global Studies Program at the University of Freiburg. Her publications include *Global Inequalities Beyond Occidentalism* (2016), *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches* (coedited with E. Gutiérrez Rodríguez and S. Costa; 2010), and *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (coauthored with Anca Parvulescu, 2022). Her work focuses on world-systems analysis, citizenship and gender in modernity/coloniality, racialization, and the geopolitics of knowledge in eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

³¹ Hall, “Créolité and the Process of Creolization,” 29.

³² Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *The Creolization of Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

³³ Manuela Boatcă, “Unequal Institutions in the *Longue Durée*: Citizenship through a Southern Lens,” *Third World Quarterly* 42 no. 9: 1982–2000.

³⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 68.

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