

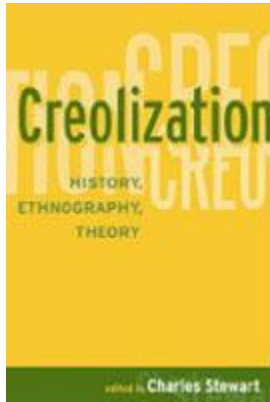


University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory

Item Type	Book Review
Authors	Stewart, Charles;Norton, Holly K.
Download date	2026-04-10 15:40:15
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/1066

Book Review



Charles Stewart, editor. *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007, 268 pps., \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 9781598742794.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Holly Norton, Syracuse University

This volume is a collection of essays that seek to contribute to what is at times a contradictory and opaque discourse on creolization in the social sciences. The book is arranged simply; eleven authors of twelve chapters, touching on the controversies and trends, all attempting to ground their substantive essay in robust cultural theory. The articles occur in a range of geographical locations, including North and South America, the Caribbean, Indian-Ocean Islands, and even modern day Japan. For ease of discussion, the articles can be grouped into one of three categories, theory, history or ethnography.

Theoretically the volume is dominated by Stephan Palmié who grounds the essays in the volume with his two pieces, Chapter 4: *The "C-Word" Again: From Colonial to Postcolonial Semantics* and Chapter 9: *Is There a Model in the Muddle? "Creolization" in African Americanist History and Anthropology*, both of which are focused on the theoretical application of concepts of creolization within the social sciences, especially anthropology. He begins by raising questions of emic versus etic designations of "creole," and the relevance of such distinctions for a robust analysis of creole societies. Without answering this question, he delves into the historical use-life of the term, primarily as it developed in the Hispanic New World, as well as related terms such as "caste." The most fundamental problem identified by Palmié is that most models of cultural creolization in the New World are predicated on models of linguistic creolization, which he defines as inescapably flawed, lacking solid historical contextualization.

Stewart included essays by linguists Phillip Baker and Peter Mühlhäusler, who discuss in depth the structure of creole linguistic studies in Chapter 5: *Creole Linguistics from its Beginnings, through Schuchardt to the Present Day*. This article provides a survey of the formal documentation and history of creole linguistics. It sheds light on the paucity of data that most linguists interested in creole and pidgin languages have at their disposal. The authors aptly illustrate that there is little consensus among linguists on how and when these languages developed, and even less empirical data from which to draw. As creole languages are a topic that have only relatively recently been deemed relevant for formal study, linguists are forced to extrapolate data sets from the observations of missionaries and other travelers to the colonial New World. This is especially problematic as many cultural models of creolization are taken from linguistic models. Most, if not all, the works in this volume evoked language as a model, even while critiquing this method. Particularly problematic from a historical archaeological point of view is the fact that the differing, and usually contradictory, theories of creole language development that dominant the discipline imply

very specific preconceived notions about plantation life and social relationships that are not always reflected in historical or archaeological discourse. Palmié touches on this, noting many scholars have stressed the need for greater historical contextualization of linguistic theory, yet citing the problem that the historians whose work the linguists should be relying on may already be informing their own work with that of the linguists, creating a teleological web that is difficult to disentangle ourselves from (p. 182, see also footnote no. 5, p. 194).

The emic versus etic distinction is also explored by the historians Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra in Chapter 2: *Creole Colonial Spanish America* and Joyce Chaplin in Chapter 3: *Creoles in British America: From Denial to Acceptance*. Cañizares-Esguerra, discusses the historical development of a local creole identity in Spanish America, focusing on the development of local identity in Mexico. This identity is created by elites born in the New World as reactionary to Old World *peninsulares* and the political and economic tension between the two groups. This idea of creole as dichotomous to *peninsulares* was built on a narrative of shared ancestry between Amerindians and Spaniards, predicated on the elite status of both, becoming a class-based identity of authority geographically rooted in the New World. This effectively marginalized enslaved Africans and common Amerindians from claims to legitimate ancestry and political or social power.

While the Spanish were re-weaving their interactions with indigenous populations into their self-labeled creole identity, the British were simultaneously denying the existence of Native Americans, and instead emphasizing their continuity with their Old World. Chaplin predicated her essay on an etic view of creole identity, as a modern academic label to describe a hemispheric phenomenon. Chaplin's thesis rests on the supposition that British North America was the quintessential creole society despite the fact that the colonial British themselves denied the term creole, perceiving it as an "Iberian" identity that was inclusive of indigenous populations. These two essays taken together incite interesting questions about the implications of inclusivity versus exclusivity in the process of creolization and the development of New World cultures.

Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen critiques the basic assumptions of the anthropological "culture concept" through the paradigm of creolization in Chapter 8: *Creolization in Anthropological Theory and in Mauritius*. Eriksen, like authors discussed previously, is suspicious of the cultural borrowing of the linguistic concept of creolization, and calls for a restricted and highly defined use of the term. The author grounds his case study in the island of Mauritius, a place that historically underwent similar experiences of plantation slavery and colonialism by European powers as the New World. In his advocacy of restricted uses of the term, the author explains how contemporary Mauritians apply "creole" to different groups in their own society, privileging an emic stance.

François Vergès skillfully grounds the abstract and often frenetic qualities of creolization in Chapter 7: *Indian Ocean Creolizations: Processes and Practices of Creolization on Reunion Island*. Vergès' discussion of the French colony that served as home (voluntarily or otherwise) to a multiplicity of people seamlessly draws the Indian-Oceanic world, which

existed contemporaneously with the colonial Caribbean world, into the discussions of what are generally thought of as New World creolization processes, creating a broader empirical arena for cultural analysis.

What unites the historians and historical anthropologists in this volume is an emphasis, not always explicit, that creolization is not just a process simply involving the mixing -- politically, economically, socially -- of disparate groups of people. It is the perception that the conflict and oppression that defined social relations during the colonial era was a key characteristic of creolization, the fundamental structure under which the mixing occurred. This is a notion that the ethnographers and researchers of contemporary cultures in this volume do not hold to as rigidly, grappling instead with the political implications of creole cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In Chapter 6: *From Miscegenation to Creole Identity: Portuguese Colonialism, Brazil and Cape Verde*, Anthropologist Miguel Vale de Almeida grapples with the criticisms of many of the other author's in this volume, yet illustrates with his case studies the difficulties of dealing with modern day "creole" on the ground, loosely contextualizing contemporary notions of "creole" in Cape Verde in broader notions of Portuguese colonialism, linking it to nationalist developments in the twentieth century. Almeida's article has significant weaknesses in that he seems to be arguing that creole equals assimilation via language, but may be useful in broader creolization discourse in that he illustrates the locational specificity of creolization, diminishing arguments that creolization is a global process.

Mary Gallagher, a Franco-phone scholar, explores twentieth century invocations of créolité and nationalism in Chapter 11: *The Créolité Movement: Paradoxes of a French Caribbean Orthodoxy*. In this article the author places Martinican Creole intellectuals in an increasingly continental metropolitan context that seems to dilute their own basic arguments about French Creole identity and autonomy. Focused on the writings of Glissant and his subsequent followers, Gallagher juxtaposes competing nationalist identities of "créolité," as being related to culture, "antillianite," a term that ultimately relates to geography and place, and "negritude," a pan-African racial identity. Gallagher questions claims of authenticity by intellectuals who align themselves within a créolité identity, questioning what it means to be creole, and who has access to defining such an identity.

Chapter 10: *Adapting to Inequality: Negotiating Japanese Identity in Contexts of Return*, by anthropologist Joshua Hotaka Roth, is the outlier in the volume. Roth's subjects are the Japanese immigrants to Brazil and their descendants, and what happens when they return to Japan seeking jobs in the contemporary economy. Although Roth denies that this cultural group is "creole," he sees the concept of "creolization" as a useful analytic tool for describing their experiences in both Brazil and Japan, similar to Chapin (this volume). However, many of the other researchers in this volume would disagree that this is an example of creolization. Roth does not ground the discussion in a historic context- it is purely descriptive, describing how Japanese-Brazilian identity becomes entrenched when faced with the scrutiny of traditional Japanese society. How this particular article falls short, especially when compared with the other entries in the volume, is that this culture

lacks the social death of indenture and enslavement experienced historically by other groups in the Caribbean and Indian-Oceanic world. In Brazil, the Japanese immigrants retained a cohesive community despite foreign influence. It is valuable in that it provides valuable ethnographic perspective in processes of cultural change, and generational information that we often lack in the historic or archaeological record- how grandparents, parents, and children all view and engage with their hyphenated identities.

In Chapter 12: *Creolization Moments*, anthropologist Aisha Khan attempts to bridge the gap between the theoretical, historical and ethnographic in her discussion of creole culture in Trinidad. The author is careful to preface her case study with a robustness that attempts to limit the over-determination that a model of creolization can take on when applied to too wide a range of contexts, and critiques the development of notions of acculturation and hybridization that influenced creolization theories in the early twentieth century. Khan points out that notions of hybridization have at times been paradoxical, as when certain groups are privileged over others in nationalist meta-narratives of history and identity. This is the political reality in Trinidad, where there is little space in the creole story for Trinidadians of Indian descent.

Taken together, the essays in this volume advance discourse on creolization and processes of culture change. As discussed by Stewart in the introduction, "'creole' and 'creolization' have meant lots of different things at different times" (p. 5). However, as the scholars in this book illustrate, there are important shared characteristics of New World creolization which continue to intrigue researchers. The questions -- and answers -- of both process and identity posed by these authors are relevant to all scholars researching the African Diaspora.