Creolizing as an Antidote to the Allures of Parochialism

Jane Anna Gordon 1,2

1 Department of Political Science, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA; jane.gordon@uconn.edu
2 Department of Social and Cultural Inquiry, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA

Abstract: This article begins with critical discussion of why parochialism is so alluring, suggesting that we need to understand its tenacious seductions if we really aim to displace, uproot, or transcend it. Arguing that parochialism as a value is not primarily a question of ignorance, but an antipathetic orientation toward incompleteness, interdependency, and entanglement, it then turns briefly to explaining what is meant by creolizing theory. The article closes by offering creolizing’s central insights as a potential antidote to parochialism since they begin with the observation that for any lifeways to meaningfully continue, especially those to which we are most attached, they must be constantly resituated, refashioned, and made new. It ends with a brief meditation on ways to manage anxieties unleashed with radical uncertainty, affirming the depth of the challenges of turning from idolatry.

Keywords: parochialism; creolizing; place; idolatry; interdependency; entanglements

1. Introduction

In my early years of teaching political theory in the mid-2000s, at some point in each semester, an undergraduate student would say, "Well, of course the United States is the best country in the world!" Almost without fail, this student would be one of many who had never had the opportunity to travel outside of the immense territory of their birth. With no experiential bases for comparison, the absence of concrete exposure to alternatives seemed to intensify their insistence. The energies that some of their peers devoted to reading about parts of the world they had not yet seen, the champions of the U.S. channeled into an article of faith: doing so was a waste of time. Having decided what was worth knowing, they would instead double-down in and buttress that orientation. With intervening years of heartbreaking national and global political challenges and the rise of a differently multipolar world, I hear the assertion of U.S. superiority far less. When it is made, it is offered more hesitantly and often rooted in the student’s sense of what is available to them, based on their specific linguistic capabilities and resources, their developed preferences and norms.

Their growing irresoluteness, which no doubt reflects the institution’s regional base, political culture, and the field of political theory, reverberates unevenly beyond the classroom. For some, the response to the palpability of global interrelations—that what is there is here and vice versa—is to lean into the questions, forms of knowing, and relationship that our new human predicament demands. The other, opposed, dominating response is literally to shore up borders and boundaries. Indeed, no single issue unites the ascendant global right more than antipathy to those personifications of global movement, immigrants—and especially immigrants from former colonies or regions with which the receiving country has been historically enmeshed. Rather than conceding that our unprecedented degrees of interdependency—evidenced indisputably by global pandemic and climate crisis—require the re-envisioning of our institutions of shared governance and collective problem-solving, the exertion necessary to devise novel creative responses is expressed in concentrated and mobilizing antipathy to the surges of people who signify the antithesis of parochialism.
Demonizing those who deliberately choose to make an unfamiliar place their home—with some repeating the process more than once—appears as a preferred mode of allaying radical uncertainty and the manifold anxieties it has unleashed.

In what follows, I briefly delineate three modes of parochialism. While they do not exhaust this larger phenomenon, they elucidate some of the many ways that we, as human beings, actively participate in the narrowing of our sensibilities and our thought. By describing the allure of each, I seek also to describe the distinct challenge to its displacement, uprooting, or transcendence. I then turn to a brief discussion of creolizing theory with the larger aim of explaining why and how its insights offer a potential antidote to the seductions of parochialism. I close with a brief meditation on the depth of the challenge of turning from idolatrous parochialism.

2. Three Faces of Parochialism

The first instance of parochialism can be treated as a universal tendency to which all human beings are prone. It is perhaps an unfortunate byproduct of inevitable attachments we all form with particular places. Whether these accounts are primarily psychological or those of geographers and social workers, theories of place-based attachment stress that human development is emplaced. We learn to be human in specific environments in which, as Jean-Paul Sartre described so poignantly in his 1963 autobiography, *The Words* [*Les Mots*], we first experience the contours of sky and/or home. However positive, negative, or ambivalent, such foundational experiences orient our spatial perspective and perceptions. Everywhere else will diverge from these initial coordinates.

Even when tinged with regret or saturated with frustration, we tend to develop a fondness of affinity—and then even nostalgia—for what is familiar to us, for what we need not learn, that which we know as intimately as pre-reflectively. This may be a place we associate with our positive becoming, setting the conditions for our fuller realization. It is where the fruits, however bruised, taste as they should and the smells, whether of cooking or sewage, are noteworthy for their lack of noteworthiness. If it is the site of a primary rejection or heartbreak; our skin might tighten when we hear its name uttered. Still, this is a place with which our association is neither casual nor contingent. For better and worse, its fabric and our own are interwoven. The cells of our senses of self are thoroughly entangled with it. Our physical stability is anchored in the framing horizon it projects. In a world dashed through with uncertainty, it at least appears steadily familiar, intimately known.

If this form of parochialism tends toward exclusivity—of thinking this is the best place because it’s my place or, more dangerously, that it may cease to be my place if it also becomes your place—such an exclusionary disposition does not necessarily follow. First, since ours is of course the best place, we will want to bring others to it, hoping they will independently affirm and spontaneously delight in its singularity. We certainly want to bring someone there if we intend to build a life with them. Can they really know us without it? Second, appreciating that we all grow with place attachments may be the basis of developing mutual understanding. If we are fortunate, we will befriend others with their own meaningful attachments that we will want to encounter. With maturation, what appeared as a nowhere or a space empty of human purpose or identity will come to be appreciated as someone else’s home. In one conception, it is precisely the multiplicity of particular places that together comprise the globe. It is our demonstrated and familiar capacity to make and remake attachments to place that are the basis for considerable optimism.

In a second mode of parochialism, also linked to particular physical locations, there is a sense that this place is uniquely fertile of human products. It is generative of historic ideas and of attractive futures. To linger with the details, of why and how, would be to miss its magic. To go there is to witness or become a resident of where the world is being made, where real life is being lived. Anything that comes from there is preferable to everything from anywhere else—even if this is only because people from everywhere else have come there and are contributing the global through it. Such places, in other words, are inevitably sustained by the resources of many elsewherebes, but they are where the ambitious prioritize
arriving. These sites are exclusive; they can multiply only by so much. While there is more than one, by definition, they are few.

The allure here is clear. Who would not crave to inhabit the stream of life simply by relocating? It doesn’t matter how poor one will become, how distanced from one’s kin, the shoddy living conditions one stomachs. What transpires there is dynamic and vital. Everything comes to one’s door. Or to a subway stop right by it. Anything that doesn’t likely isn’t worth encountering.

This is a parochialism first because in it is a mistaken sense that one absorbs the world simply through physical proximity to it. That exposure requires no interpretive effort. More, it is premised upon the sense that, by comparison, every place that is not this one is, without question, a relative nowhere: a place one leaves to find reality. And a pulse. Such an orientation continues to saturate conceptions of the relationship of the urban to the rural, the core to the periphery.

To call this a mode of parochialism is not to deny that some locations are more porous than others. Coasts, for instance, are defined globally by a historical and continued norm of openness to a greater variety of modes of exchange. Similarly, if in different ways, it is no accident that crossroads serve everywhere as metaphors for the profound uncertainty born of plural possibilities. There are spaces, where intellectuals and artists often flock, that human communities designate as ones devoted to creative exploration.

The error is to mistake the location for the processes it enables. Global cities are thrilling because they are teeming, internally, with places. Still, one can live in an insulated bubble in a converging globe. Indeed, the quickest route to genuine parochialism is assuming that one is incapable of it—an article of faith held by so many big-city dwellers. More, despite highly creative, often effective ecological efforts that involve maximizing shared uses of limited land, a perennial difficulty with major urban centers is their unsustainability. Premised upon the expectation that one’s demands can only be met there, urbancentrism diverts attention that could be directed to how we radically decentralize and further localize the meeting of needs.

The third mode of parochialism shifts our focus from place to persons, to claiming that everything good comes from us. Wherever we are, whatever we do, is the world. Or that part of the world worth knowing. This version of parochialism is elusively tied to geography but only to the extent that a particular territorial region is narrated as setting the mythological scene for the idea or emergence of a particular people.

This is the Europe that projects itself backward across time and space to forge a supposed uninterrupted genealogy with (fifth-century Athenian) Greeks and Romans (of the republic and then empire), for whom even proto-Europeanism is really a misnomer. The aspiration weaving this faulty, connective thread is that any truly historic philosophical ideas worthy of global embrace sprouted sui generis from the minds of members of a continuous community. This is a Europe whose boundaries are constantly shifting—depending upon its most relevant contemporaneous foes and other sources of derivative self-definition. But it is not only Europe, even if its parochialism has had the most outsized global relevance in the previous five centuries. Any claim to intrinsic group superiority, even as the most mediocre, along with a commitment to monitor for and shed any diluting impurities, poses a mortal danger.

For the great Black U.S. freedom fighter Martin Luther King, Jr., this form of parochialism (whether of race prejudice and/or narrow nationalism) was an instance of idolatry or “false worship”. It was a “spiritual myopia” that limited who, by accidents of religious belonging or race, could be seen as a neighbor. An expression of self-love that disembedded some human beings from relations of fellowship and mutual support that King hoped to restore in cultivating the Beloved Community, it translated into a failure “to see our own finitude and our dependence on others”. It was “a utilitarian love” of only those people who could be used (King 2007, 399 [14]). King offered the assurance of moral consequences: “These people don’t work out well in life (King 2000, 127 [15])”. Distorting our perceptions
of and relationships with ourselves, others, and legitimate sources of value, the idolatry of antiblack racism produced alienation from the human world and the divine.

Such setting up of one’s group’s self as G-d made it difficult—if not impossible—to maintain a focus on any greater good. George Kelsey, who taught King Bible, saw the idolatry of racism as more than a technology of social domination that offered retroactive justification for enslavement and colonialism. Its own “source of meaning and object of loyalty (Livingstone 2023, 16 [12])”, it was actively expressed in “self-exaltation and seeking to nullify by vilifying the selfhood of members of outraces”. Still, devotion to whiteness betrayed the love owed to all people, including white people themselves.

King illustrated these claims by arguing that the Good Samaritan embodied the opposite of such idolatry. Seeing their neighbor both ecumenically (beyond religion and race) and as an extension of the Samaritan’s self, the Samaritan is compelled not to ignore the wounded person on Jericho Road. For the Samaritan, the wounded is a part of the Samaritan and the Samaritan is part of the wounded. The agony of the wounded diminishes the Good Samaritan while the wounded’s salvation enlarges them. The Samaritan is the Good Samaritan precisely by looking beyond a “narrow parochialism”, by “remov[ing] the cataracts of provincialism from [their] spiritual eyes” to human beings as human beings.

As Alex Livingstone explains, for King, we worship G-d when we identify the human in each person we encounter, whether in moments of triumph or travail.

One of the many scars of racial segregation is the way it has translated into white people’s “seeming inability to perceive the suffering of others as real (Livingstone 2023, 19 [12])”. Crucially, as Livingstone explains, this inability “is not from a lack of knowledge but an incapacity to acknowledge the entanglement of their fates with ours; the obligations [of] interdependence”. What makes such idolatry—and parochialism—so hard to uproot is that it is not, as so many claim, rooted in ignorance that can be undone by deliberate learning. Its eradication demands nothing less than the smashing of idols: idols one has made of oneself.

If the allure of this mode of parochialism is nothing less than the seduction of idolatry, how does one smash, rather than simply substitute, the idols?

3. Insights from Creolizing Theory

The earliest written use of the world creole dates back to the 1500s to name people of mixed blood. As a social scientific concept, creolization gained currency in the nineteenth century to name what were seen by primarily European and Euro-American writers as unique and aberrational human symbolic forms born primarily of plantation societies of the New World, as well as in comparable situations of human enslavement on the eastern and southern coasts of Africa and of Asia. In the Caribbean, enslaved Africans were brought in contact with Europeans in lands that the latter tried to clear through genocide, repeated forced removals, and later mandatory assimilation of Indigenous populations. In such instances, people who had not historically lived in proximity—a colonial class, enslaved people, dispossessed Indigenous populations, and subsequent waves of primarily Chinese and East Indian laborers—would live in violently unequal relations that threatened previously discrete existing orders of collective meaning.

Out of these situations, adaptations developed through resituating, mistranslation, and reinvention. What distinguished creolization from other more familiar and ongoing forms of cultural mixture was the radical and intensified nature of the interchange of symbols and practices among groups of individuals who had not been rooted in their new location or who were so significantly uprooted by these developments that they often referred to themselves as living in the apocalypse. While some direct transplants of previous cultural forms remained, existing in parallel to each other, more characteristic were new combinations of once disparate meanings that took on degrees of stability and standardization, charting distinctive genealogies.

These new forms belied the project to create neat Manichean white supremacist worlds. They offered concrete evidence that those who unequally occupied these brutal societies
did not remain sealed off from each other. Instead, they lived in relations of antagonistic, intimate, multidirectional, and complex interpenetration. European transplants were not the sole custodians or authors of culture and Africans were neither, as some accounts suggested, stripped entirely of previous cultural forms and singularly acculturated into European ways of acting nor enveloped in only ossified remnants of retentions from the mother continent. Indeed, as many subsequent waves of scholars of the Caribbean have noted, it is a creolizing account that helps to illuminate quite how African the Caribbean has been.

At the forefront of early social scientific studies of creolizing processes were European linguists who turned to creolized languages to resolve linguistic debates over how Latin had developed into multiple distinct European tongues. Aiming to determine how substratum languages (or the primary languages of language learners) contributed to how the target language was spoken (even fluently), their study of Afrikaans and “New World” creole languages offered examples of non-European languages with European lexical terms that mirrored how Romance languages combined a Latin lexifier with various substratal vernaculars. But more, these new linguistic examples suggested that restricting each language to one genetic originating point was inadequate. If creole languages could combine multiple lexifiers and substrates, so too could all other languages. The implications were far-reaching; as Salikoko S. Mufwene argued, creole languages then and now pose and illuminate the hardest and most fundamental linguistic questions (See Mufwene (1998 [20]). This is because they push to their logical conclusion the evolutionary tendencies and possibilities in all tongues. Creole and noncreole languages are not structurally different. Instead, the regular processes in both are radically quickened in the ecology of places that give rise to creoles.

These scholarly developments informed subsequent tracing of the emergence of Francophone Caribbean creoles. In Robert Chaudenson’s classic account, following initial sporadic intracommunal contact, relatively homogenous groups of primarily rural poor Frenchmen working for companies and landlords spoke nonstandard varieties of French with very young enslaved people forced into deliberate projects of deculturation. What emerged in a generation was a mixed-race Black–white (“mulatto”) population that spoke a language that combined a nonstandard French lexifier with their own substratal tongues (note here the plural). As the reliance on enslaved labor intensified and newly arrived Africans became the majority, they were largely segregated as field laborers away from the Europeans and theiracrolect language, so much so that their primary points of contact were with mixed-race enslaved people and their mesolect language. As they learned this tongue, they shaped how it was spoken. Specifically, they combined additional substratal languages in a process of basilectalization, creating a complex linguistic continuum between the standard nonstandard French and various creole forms, with the basilectal forms as the fruits of newer and more autonomized elaborations.

As Mufwene observed in this and other linguistic contexts, no native or fluent speaker ever entirely possesses a language. Outside of scholastic systems, it is communicative needs of a social environment that determine the aspects of a language one learns. One is introduced to vocabulary and partial rules through which one infers and through trial and error develops some competence. In the vast majority of cases, one’s aim in language learning is use rather than mastery, especially since “mastery” of a language as an object is never adequate as a judgment of “mastery” of communication in contexts of use. Additionally, it is not converging communities as communities that engage in language contact, negotiation, and innovation. Just as individual acts of reproduction affect the larger species, it is multiple ongoing and simultaneous individual encounters that collectively produce shared language. Finally, the repeating and codifying of imperfect replication or just error is a normal feature of all languages; it is just more rapid in creole communities than those that are monolingual (See Mufwene (1998 [20]).

Chaudenson and Mufwene and Paget Henry—in the context of articulating a distinct Afro-Caribbean philosophy—observe that in Caribbean societies, it is domains of life
outside of politics and intellectual life, those of music, religion, food, and dance, that are far more thoroughly creolized (See Chaudenson (2001 [21]) and Henry (2000 [22]). By contrast, European and Euro-descended people sought to exercise a dominating, centripetal force, an exclusive monopoly over authoritative power and claims to Reason[15]. This has been met, in turn, with many forms of resistance, including use of denigrated language expressive of alternative modalities of engaging the social world. For instance, deliberate “imperfect replication” can be a defiant insistence on the indispensability of the ways enslaved people have remained independent sources of signification.

Defining creolized forms, whether Jamaican Patois, calypso music, or Cajun food, is the convergence of a range of contributing sources which one wouldn’t expect, based on their prior, distinct histories. One can identify the individual already highly syncretized contributing elements in the new form, and as such a degree of continuity, at the same time as something radically new that emerges with their combination. Importantly, as with spices and other culinary ingredients, elements of language, its rhythm, and its semiotic capacities are not translated into the new form but incorporated often with shifts in meaning that need not be lamented. Such strategic, unauthorized appropriation of symbols of power against their initial purpose reject a neat distinction between creativity and imitation.

Even if the once semi-autonomous sources will be forgotten as the new creolized product is claimed and standardized, in places that emphasize creolization in their collective self-identities, one witnesses greater awareness of the permeable and forged nature of symbolic forms. For those interested, the forms themselves are valuable mirrors that might reveal dimensions of the actual human past that have been denied or illuminate relations that structure a given society. For instance, one can revisit the historical fact that half of the enslaved people who fought in what through revolution became the Republic of Haiti had been born in Africa and that they and allied abolitionists used the lingua franca of Kreyyl. Today, one could consider how a community still very marginal to national political life might significantly influence that place’s food, music, or spiritual practices[16].

Creolization describes an intensity of interaction, much more than casual cohabitation, and, in most social scientific work, has referred to illicit blendings or ones that contradicted the project of a Manichean racial order in which one’s phenotype tracked one’s relative ability to be the creator and custodian of culture, civilization, and language. As such, in these instances, creolization tracked syntheses among supposed unequals that an imperial sensibility would simply call corruption or bastardization of a European or white original. As such, creolized products were those that surprised and bothered people as they conjoined distinct genealogies that were not supposed to converge, suggesting depths of mutual constitution that racial thinking sought to make impossible. Still, if it was this consternation that singled out these forms, creolizing describes a larger process of continuity and rupture that often has but need not contain elements of Euro- or imperial influence[17].

As may already be clear, in most instances, creolization is used retrospectively to describe what has transpired. However, in a way that was strikingly different from the political obsession with original, sanitized foundings in the United States[18], in the independence movements of the Anglo- and Francophone Caribbean, there was a deliberate celebration of creolization as naming what was distinctively non-European and non-Euro-Caribbean. Rather than a territory that mapped clearly onto a people and language with supposedly deep, singular, homogenous national roots, Caribbean national identity celebrated multinations of people who became unified and local. Such discourse emphasized the process of emergence, even if in highly imperfect form, over an original unsullied core that had to be defended from dilution or pollution.

Such prescriptive creolization was creatively elaborated in the highly influential work of Caribbean social and literary theorists Edouard Glissant, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant (See Glissant (2008 [25], 1997 [26], 1999 [27]) and Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant (1993 [28]). In their hands the creolizing norms of the Caribbean—of Afro-Caribbeans in particular—achieved unprecedented degrees of
individual and collective existential openness. In a defiantly dynamic orientation, they treated culture as a permanently unfinished, dynamic search for new possibilities of mutual enrichment. If forms with some duration of shared practice emerged, they did not become sedimented. If no one would have chosen—or would choose—the conditions that led to Caribbean instances of creolizing, what emerged from what Glissant called these “laboratories of disorder” were templates of a future that challenged conventional linearity through a relational complicity that opens onto diversity (See Glissant 2008 [25]). For Alexis Nouss, building from Glissant, such diversity reflected a new social arithmetic in which our identities are each 100% of every group to which we belong (See Nouss (2009 [29]).

The distinctiveness of such formulations have been rightfully celebrated as efforts to envision practices of collectivity and institution-building that, in explicitly aiming to be more porous and open, could also be more democratic, egalitarian, and living. They appeared to offer a political account of membership, identity, and belonging that deliberately sought to counter the cultural imperialism of Euromodern modalities of expression. They were also, as is true of all concepts, interpreted and refracted through local political vocabularies and meaningful associations. Island political cultures birthed with racialized plantation slavery remained dominated by color hierarchies. In such a context, creolization appeared to reinforce the greater value of mixture evident in lighter skin or those mixed with non-Africans. Similarly, at the center of creolizing imagery was emphasis on the rural over the urban, when the latter arguably evidenced greater continuation of the process of creolization. In centering processes of mixture, creolization also seemed to cherish meeting and reconciliation, including with one’s historical and continued oppressors. In contexts such as Brazil, as an ethic, this seemed to undercut the necessary ability to draw clear political fault-lines, those essential for clarifying who could—and would not—function as emancipatory allies. Finally, as discourses of creolization are part stylized history and part national ideal, actual commitments to an ever-emergent polity appeared temporally limited: writers suggested that in creolization’s emphasis on what had emerged as indigenous, peoples who had inhabited the islands were framed as entirely gone, with little attention to or interest in ongoing histories of resistance, survivance, and a profound desire to be left alone. Similarly, it was said that processes of creolization were not as amenable to or agile with newer populations of unfree laborers, whether Chinese or Indian. Rather than actually remaining open, as Glissant, Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant sought, the focus instead reflected the foundational divides that had set the grammar of racial obsessions centuries before.

At the same time, the concept of creolization enables one to advance such criticisms through distinguishing the processes of creolization from particular products generated by them. This distinction helps understand what transpired in cases where elite, mixed-race people, who were fruits of particular moments of mixture, claimed special, exclusive authority as creole or mestizo, setting themselves up as models to be duplicated rather than remaining active parts of a continued process of creolizing. In that regard, it is especially necessary to emphasize that while discussion of it dominates much scholarly debate, creolization need not involve mixture on the model of racial mixture or reconciliation with the conventionally powerful. Indeed, the kind of ongoing development of political ideas it demands is anathema to most members of such camps. By contrast, among bosales (rather than creoles) in Haiti and many nations Native to the U.S., ongoing openness to specifically African and Indigenous syncretism is a practiced commitment. At the same time, all such criticisms can and should inform uses of creolization as a deliberately crafted undertaking in or beyond the more controlled domain of intellectual production.

While there is nothing intrinsically progressive in forms of mixture that emerge from creolizing processes—beyond an openness (rather than closedness) to unprecedented mergings—it is rare that progressive movements are not creolizing. Still, in many mass movements, we see discrete marginalized groups converge to challenge forms of unfreedom. As is always the case, those involved with and implicated by processes of creolization cannot determine the conditions within which it takes place. The same is true of conditions
of struggle. For example, given that imperialism is both global and differentiated and that conquering continues to rely on dividing would-be allies, effective strategies frequently treat each community as offering distinct insights into related dimensions of a fractured world. Creating alternatives therefore requires thinking across co-constituted registers, discerning what, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued, the differences have in common so as to redefine what could be in and through each other.

As is true with most vital instances of creolization, though it is not their purpose, these efforts produce fusions of symbols and language to give expression to what is newly underway. If they are not hemmed in by a conservative concern with generating impurities, what emerges does not perfectly replicate previous uses. This is what efforts to create new counterhegemonies will inevitably look like, especially if their aim is to expand collective thriving. It is evident in living processes created by those who assume the political future must be constructed, rather than simply continued or maintained. While some have called this creolization from below (See Bohrer (2024 [33]), or could describe it as further creolizing creolization, it is actually just continued creolizing, absent forces of decreolization.

4. Some Antidotes?

What, if anything, does attention to a concept long associated with processes that unfolded in the Caribbean offer to those clinging—as a right and a security blanket—to their parochialism? After all, as Melissa Williams writes, deparochializing “is a demanding, active, ongoing, and incomplete practice (Williams (2020, 4 [34])”. Among its core elements, reflects James Tully, is “a practice of self that does not flinch from the epistemic and psychological challenges of engaging with the thought of culturally different others within profoundly unequal power relations (Ibid. [34])”.

Returning to our three modes of parochialism, let us begin with the tendency toward place attachments or to love of the specific physical sites of foundational experiences that set the coordinates of our spatial perspectives, to our tenderness for a steady familiarity which we understand as part and parcel of our own identities.

Since attention to creolizing processes focuses on how forms of symbolic life are creatively adapted to and made local, it can be understood as sharing a relish for the specificity of place (think here of the way a creole linguist studies the ranges of Kreyól/Creole/Patois, impressed deeply by the similar and divergent quotidian creativities in speech across the geographically small archipelago of the Caribbean). Indeed, for the lover of a particular town, we can understand turning to creolizing resources as leaning into that existing love. After all, if the fondness is so deeply rooted, anything new that we learn about it is in a sense to discover more about the existing object of our love—and through it about ourselves. Would not learning about the complex, refracted processes that generated our ways of speaking or our favorite foods be met with curious appreciation? Already valuing their contributions without having recognized them as their source, will our attitude to the layered waves of migrants from within and beyond the U.S. not be one of delayed gratitude and a sense of serendipitous familiarity in what are discovered as shared practices with those we might have considered strangers? These people from elsewhere are already part of who we are! Should not the awe we feel as we breath in this landscape cultivate profound gratitude for those who have served as its conscientious custodians?

As with any love, it can, of course, be tested. One might learn of tragedies, triumphs, or tragic triumphs that so strain one’s previous perceptions that one might be thrown into crisis: maybe I never knew what I thought I knew and loved best. If one has disdained a particular community, it will give one pause to realize one has been using “their words”, loving what are as much “their recipes”, as one’s own. Still, since such places are, by definition, shared and plural, one is likely to prioritize coming to grips with even devastating aspects of one’s place’s past (and present) rather than surrendering one’s affinity. One’s love might even mature; one can no longer only disdain a community that has been indispensable to weaving one’s social fabric. Already devoted to it, learning about the mutual indebtedness of interdependence that has given lifeways in our place their character may delight us. The
place we thought we knew best can still surprise us! We have been entangled with others all along. **Who knew?!** Lastly, we might then realize that if creolizing processes are a fact of our place, it is of those places to which others are uniquely attached too. Love of particular places, then, can ironically be an avenue toward de-parochializing ourselves as we come to understand the complex ways they were constituted and have continued to be remade.

Turning next to the snobbish city-lover, we must begin with the findings that in the U.S., the density of population where a voter lives is an excellent predictor of how they will vote. Those in urban centers disproportionately lend their electoral support to policies that are more inclusive and embracing of human diversity. As such, they would seem ripe for embracing creolizing insights, no? After all, the central draw is that the city is where one can find everything.

The already mentioned challenge here is the tendency to mistake the place of the city for the ongoing processes that have and may still generate its character. Absent such understanding, an urban center can create obstacles to continued creolization, collapsing, as Lewis R. Gordon has warned, into exclusive playgrounds for rich adolescents (Gordon (2017 [35]). A smorgasbord of discrete cultural pockets that only border one another, one can find everything one needs in a small set of blocks one only leaves for work or an exceptional excursion. Thinking that one has access to all that is worth encountering, what one thinks of as all shrinks to one’s limited orbit.

In response, a creolizing lens offers a different account of how forms of symbolic life remain dynamic. It might suggest that an arrogance of presumed access masks how entry has been restricted in ways that will reduce the once generative nature of the place. To understand such change, one would have to linger with the details of how it was that the globe once did converge there; why, despite the astronomical costs, so many flocked to its relative freedom, or at least permissiveness. It would insist that suffusing this small land mass were the yearnings for enlarged opportunities limited elsewhere; that many would not have migrated if such circumstances were more broadly and deliberately dispersed. But even if one is lucky enough to inhabit a center, isn’t it what one does there that determines its relative vitality? And isn’t one more likely to seek that out if one does not assume that anywhere that one is absent is lacking value? In other words, one must bring to one’s orientation to the city what is absent in one’s relationship with everything beyond it—an assumption that it (and everywhere else) comprises places to which people are meaningfully attached and for good reason.

A creolizing approach would urge that the most exciting forms of creativity have never emerged from any one place or people, that no single community can exercise a rightful monopoly on valuable ideas. Innovation instead is in how one responds to running up against limitations of existing practices, shifting rather than seeking to expand them beyond their actual reach. A legacy of European colonialism has been using different pockets of the world for discrete purposes, all unilaterally dictated from a small set of centers. These patterns have generated related if varied circumstances that often lead people without shared histories of contact to now converge in major metropolitan areas. It is therefore understanding in what ways our cities are global that expands our sense of what has been and is possible. Among what becomes thinkable are meanings of the urban and its necessary relations to its surroundings near and far²⁰.

Turning finally to those who have made idols of themselves and the communities to which they claim to belong, a creolizing approach to history demonstrates that most claims to *sui generis* creativity rely on *lying and hiding* relations of indebtedness. In some cases, as Peter K.J. Park documents, such deception is deliberate (Park (2014 [36]). In subsequent generations, it is often just reproduced with the conservative authorizing norms of much of the academy.

With particular attention again to colonial geographic imaginaries, creolizing resources especially emphasize relations forged and opportunistically erased. After all, how can France or Britain or the U.S. be shocked by the Francophone and Anglophone migrants seeking to enter their hallowed terrains? Their development, as Walter Rodney and Samir
Amin so powerfully demonstrated, was produced with the underdevelopment of their colonies (See Rodney (1982 [37]) and Amin (2009 [38]).

But a creolizing frame would additionally assure that the desire for sui generis production is an error. After all, there is no issue with borrowing. It is an unavoidable feature of human cohabitation and exchange. The problem is when that borrowing is not credited, thereby becoming theft. Creolizing might also offer resources that make giving credit seem less treacherous. After all, it illustrates that claims to absolute originality are entirely unnecessary. Through its lens, creativity consists as readily in how one adapts systems of value to new circumstances, figuring out, despite the considerable constraints, how to breathe new life into them. Originality, then, is about how one forges relations rather than successfully separating oneself from such enmeshment. One need not be the only community to have meditated on questions of justice or the indispensability of beauty to be valuable. In fact, one might reinterpret sharing in the history of such protracted, cross-generational deliberations as signaling one’s belonging in an enlarged community of potential interlocutors rather than seeking a brand of self-definition that preemptively alienates them.

5. Concluding Meditations on Smashing Idols

For idolators who genuinely love ideas or painting or wrestling (or any other artistic or athletic practice) along with their false god, there is hope. Like the lovers of particular places, their depth of committed fascination can provide an opening. Through it, they might discover the form’s likely creolized development and with it their already extant relations with perhaps unlikely contributors. Slowly, a different vision of their interdependent entanglement might tug them out of their limited and limiting deceptive love of self.

For those without such active commitments, one might rely on the idolator’s concern for truthfulness. After all, idolatry reifies a lie, treating a false god as divine. Tracing more accurate stories of the emergence of whatever they have claimed to unilaterally generate might at least stir some wavering. Most people live mundanely with contradictions, but many are concerned that they honestly understand them. For some, underlying a worry about dishonesty is a respect for fair attribution: one wants to accurately credit who does what. The challenge here is whether they will accept your evidence as credible.

For idolators who want, first and foremost, to be with whatever is considered the best, one can begin to disaggregate. Best at what? If the highest existing standard really is their concern, one can point, both in the past and now, to better realizations of some of their aims elsewhere. Affirming their valuing of the most skillfully realized versions of given aims, one can, say, compare the railroads of the U.S. and of Japan. Admitting that different communities can make their own legitimate claims of exemplarity can create some room. A response might be de-deification or at least plural deification!

A more cynical tack might point out that for anything to be experienced as remaining the same, it must in fact change; that Europe and Europeans, the U.S. and U.S. Americans are not a constant community, and that the English language is continually remade by and with its changing speakers. As such, new determinations keep a form living. And there will always be disputes. The desire, then, to treat any one community as having all the answers presumes an internal unity that is as fragile as it is fallacious. Antipathy to its actual inner diversity leaves such groups less equipped to contend with it as a strength, overdetermining their embittered splintering. In other words, the hatred that underlies a community’s self-reification promises its self-destruction. Still, it can do tremendous damage to others before reaching this inevitable outcome.

Perhaps more straightforward is to demonstrate to idolators that they can and will survive the breaking of idols; that life without them is infinitely richer. One can try to exemplify this alternative through the how one lives, inviting shaky idolators in, as appropriate and safe. One can create communities into which they can dip their toe, seeing whether they can’t become more fully themselves there. Without being overly heavy-handed, one can showcase the remarkable human capacity for creativity, underscoring
how it has and can continue to generate arrays of answers to seemingly insurmountable challenges. Among such answers are those needed when previous plans reveal their unavoidable imperfections.

And if that doesn’t work, one can read (or re-read) Torah (The Five Books of Moses) with the idolator, pausing with them at the multiple turns when it is negotiating with Moses that leads G-d to make improved decisions, to better realize the aim of establishing G-d as supreme among all regional divinities. Even G-d, as recounted in this sacred text, learned and grew through dissent and debate, being remade as divine through relations with G-d’s mortal creations.

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### Notes

1. The literature on attachment to place or place-attachment theory is vast. For instance, Daniel R. Williams and Brett Alan Miller (2021 [1]) outline fifty years of research that they suggest has benefited from sustained, multidisciplinary inquiry. From the 1960s through the present, they loosely map what they advance as the “braided” study from place as a material container of exceptional human beings to a center of meaning and identity and science of embodied practice that increasingly emphasizes the human–environmental dynamics illuminated by ecocriticism, environmental justice movements, actor network theory, and mobility practices. Some recent representative works include Lynne C. Manzo and Patrick Devine-Wright’s (2018 [2]) chapter where they distinguish between primarily social and symbolic civic place attachment at the city–town level from natural place attachments or emotional ties to specific the natural features of one’s local area. Expanding upon this second leg of research, Georgina G. Gurney, Jessica Blythe, Helen Adams, and Natalie Marshall (2017 [3]) argue that social and environmental changes that intensify global connectedness demand new ways of conceiving of community through exploring how local, national, and international stakeholders define attachment to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. They ultimately suggest that such place attachment can bridge geographic and social boundaries in ways that can be leveraged to foster a transnational stewardship that will be necessary to facing global sustainability challenges. In *The Power of Place in Place Attachment* [4], geographers Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagan curate chapters illuminating how place attachments shape everyday routines, major life choices, and identities, emphasizing how such attachments occur across scales. Echoing some of their earlier work, they stress how geographers have contributed to the study of place, if under other names, and people’s capacity to make and remake place attachments. Jack Gordon [5] urges social workers to devote some of the attention they have to attachment to *people to attachment to place* (as have geographers and environmental psychologists). He cautions that as children have less independent access to their surroundings (resulting from parental fears), such developments might endanger their development of place attachments. Finally, economist and regional scientist John V. Winters [6] explores how while generally beneficial, place-based attachments can harm individuals tied to economically struggling areas. He shows that most persons born in the U.S. live as adults in their birth states and that those numbers have increased over time, especially among the highly educated.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau poignantly warned that to grow up in urban centers is to develop in narcissistic worlds run through with the imperatives of public seeing and being seen in ways that interfere with cultivating the independent capacity to “follow one’s own lights”. In a way that Hannah Arendt would later echo in her educational writings, a gift to young people is some shadow from the glare of the collective and often unforgiving gaze, a lack of attention as one practices, through trial and error, how one will engage in civic life. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1960, 60 [8]) and Hannah Arendt (1968 [9]).

3. As has been so generatively illuminated by Gloria Anzaldúa [10], the same is true with borders, which have crucially informed entire domains of theorizing, especially of people made not to fit through how we have historically organized human political communities.

4. Included among intellectuals and artists are those whose ways of living are expressions of aesthetic and other modes of creativity. For an excellent discussion of the reliance on demonized Ottomans for such shifting European self-definitions, see Altan Atamer (2023 [11]).

5. Alexander Livingstone notes that King adds scientific rationality and the pursuit of wealth to forms of worship that “promise of meaning but deliver only tragedy” since they sever us from the depths and breadth of love of G-d and how it guides and underpins service to and kinship with fellow human beings. See Livingstone (2023, 21 [12]). As with all idolatry, this is “false
worship” in the sense that what is erected and worshipped as divine “are not gods at all . . . [but] made by human hands” (2023, 16 [12]).

Livingstone (2023, 17 [12]) and Livingstone citing King (2010, 94 [13]), when making this point.

Livingstone cites King’s (2007, 541 [14]) wonderful elaboration of this point: “Hatred has chronic eye trouble—it cannot see very far”, King remarks in one sermon. “Love has sound eyes—it can see beneath the surface and beyond the outer mask”. See Livingstone (2023, 18 [12]).

Livingstone quotes Kelsey (1965, 23 [16]).

Livingstone quotes King (2010, 24 [17]).

Ibid., italics added for emphasis [12].

On this point, see Oscar Guardiola Rivera (2010, [18]).

In Dakar, Senegal at the “Debating the Colonial Library” conference organized and hosted by CODESRIA in 2013, one West African scholar admitted that he considered the Caribbean more African than contemporary Africa. He explained that this was because the further cultural elaborations that had taken place in the Western hemisphere grew from African lifeworlds that, if forcibly taken to the Americans with the enslaved, came from a continent that had not yet experienced European colonialism. Important, however, and illuminated in Jean Casimir’s The Haitians, is that the Africanness of the Caribbean was a creolized, synthetic blending of discrete African contributions. See Jean Casimir (2020 [19]).

See Chaudenson (2001 [21]). For all its crucial insight, this classical sociolinguistic approach still treats language as an object to be examined rather than as a living conduit of human connection.

These patterns were mirrored in the academy, even in a Caribbean that had been formally independent for some four decades. Students of ethnomusicology, dance, and literature were far more likely to encounter works of the fuller range of Caribbean people than any who studied philosophy or political theory.

While it is a mistake to diminish any form of influence, attention to uneven creolization can equip one to name the ideology of racial democracy in Brazil as horribly incomplete through showing a great openness to the presence of Africa in food and dance, but not politics or intellectual life. On this point, see Sharon Stanley (2018 [23]).

An important point that emerges from this one is that creolizing does not contain the Euromodern preference for treating language as an object that must be mastered to demonstrate one’s cultural or social status. I thank Jacqueline Martinez for this key observation.

For illuminating discussion of this point, see (Bernal 2017 [24]).

As Michael Monahan has poignantly insisted, we must consider the telos of creolization when judging its normative or political value. He and I have both argued that its aim, in our use, is liberation. See Monahan (2023 [30], 2011 [31]) and Gordon (2014 [32]).

I am thinking here of the historic development of Dakar, Senegal, which grew through incorporating what had been farms. Such an approach resonates profoundly with U.S. urban gardening movements that suggest that urbanity and rurality need not name opposed relationships to land and the growing of food.

References


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