Creolizing Europe

Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Shirley Anne Tate

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Chapter 4

Continental Creolization: French Exclusion through a Glissantian Prism

H. Adlai Murdoch

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie
I feel like me heart gwine burs
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan in reverse.
By de hundred, by de tousan
From country and from town,
By de ship-load, by de plane-load
Jamaica is Englan boun.
Dem a pour out a Jamaica
Everybody future plan
Is fe get a big-time job
An settle in de mother lan.
What a islan! What a people!
Man an woman, old an young
Jus a pack dem bag an baggage
An tun history upside dung!
Some people doan like travel
But fe show dem loyalty
Dem all a open up cheap-fare-
To-Englan agency.
An week by week dem shippin off
Dem countryman like fire,
Fe immigrate an populate
De seat a de Empire.
Oonoo see how life is funny,
Oonoo see de tunabout?
Jamaica live fe box bread
Out a English people mout’.
For wen dem ketch a Englan,
An start play dem different role,
Some will settle down to work
An some will settle fe de dole.
Jane say de dole is not too bad
Because dey payin she
Two pounds a week fe seek a job
Dat suit her dignity.
Me say Jane will never fine work
At de rate how she dah look,
For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch
An read love-story book.
Wat a devilment a Englan!
Dem face war an brave de worse,
But me wonderin how dem gwine stan
Colonizin in reverse.

Louise Bennett, ‘Colonisation in Reverse’ (1966)

Introduction

This chapter examines the ways in which migrant Caribbean diasporas inscribe critical paradoxes of migrancy and citizenship in contemporary Europe, concentrating on displaced inhabitants of French Caribbean overseas departments who were made citizens of France in 1946. The resulting diasporic intersections give rise to critical transformations of Frenchness and Caribbeanness engendered by the pressing presence in the metropoles of communities spawned by these migration-based demographic shifts. This French Caribbean-derived metropolitan community has become virtually 1 percent of the French hexagonal population, and their cultural and identititarian hybridities increasingly destabilize our current notions of nationality and belonging.

As the formerly colonizing metropolitan sites themselves became subject to massive postcolonial migration movements after 1945, embodying what Homi Bhabha (1994, 216–217) calls ‘the new international space of discontinuous historical realities’, the resulting shifts in population structure made plain the need to redefine and reinscribe former colonial European metropoles through the growing ethno-cultural prism of their newly arrived populations – Caribbean, African, South Asian – and the patterns
of exchange, transformation and alternative cultural production with
which they increasingly inflected these European sites. In this complex
interplay between center and periphery, the tensions and teleologies of these
competing, contradictory forces of universalism and fragmentation would
render traditional French and European definitions of identity increasingly
amorphous, protean and plural, resulting in ‘new structures for group
identification and collectivity’ (Slemon, 2001, 102). This leads us to posit
a new set of sites and strategies outside the ‘traditional’ location of the
periphery, relocating both the boundaries of the postcolonial experience
and the functional framework of the process of ‘creolization’, historically
read and defined as purely a temporal and locational product of the colonial
encounter.

Creole and creolization

In etymological terms, the word ‘Creole’ is inscribed as an inherently
unstable category, embodying the ambiguities and essentialisms of its origins
in the colonial period. Indeed, we find it inscribed in terms that stress both
its grounding in ethno-cultural mixture and the absence of any specific
racial reference, used to define second-generation persons born outside their
‘continent of origin’, whether it be Europe or Africa. In this way, a person
designated as Creole, or criollo (to cite the word’s origins in the mixtures
that became part and parcel of Spanish colonial praxis) could be white or
black, colonizer or colonized, but of key importance is the play of difference
that the term implies, rendering a Creole subject or culture the product of
myriad ethnic and cultural encounters and intersections.

The arc of signification of the term ‘Creole’, then, implies a certain fluidity
that posits a continuum of ethnic hybridity and doubleness as its basic context,
providing a network of pluralisms upon which traditional readings of Creole
phenomena are constructed. But from a global perspective, the phenomenon
of creolization arose as much out of wars, conquests and population shifts as
from the effects of the colonial encounter. Since colonialism – particularly in
its Western expansionist guise that peaked around the end of the nineteenth
century – has impacted in one way or another the attributes and character-
istics of both center and periphery, colonially driven patterns of creolization
arguably lie at the center of a globalized contemporary network of cultural
crossings and ethnic intersection that are one of the principal markers of
modernity itself. These crossings, the product, in Salman Rushdie’s phrase,
of the ways in which ‘the empire writes back to the centre’, draw on post/
colonial migration and its attendant demographic changes to inscribe a
double time of cross-cultural encounters, an interpenetration of populations
and practices once driven by the colonial metropole’s centrifugal force(s)
but now (re)turning to the center in a reverse flow of ethnicity, subjectivity
and culture.
Now if, as Balutansky and Sourieau, the editors of the recent volume *Caribbean Creolization*, have suggested, creolization is defined as ‘a syncretic process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities’, this notion of change works with multiplicities of history, culture and identity to ‘undermine any academic or political aspiration for unitary origins or authenticity’ (Balutansky and Sourieau, 1998, 3). This allows us to posit the abrogation of continental notions of false universalism and new juxtapositions and interactions of signification that give rise to contested contexts of identity, interstitality and difference that reflect the increasingly composite nature of contemporary metropolitan populations. By the same token, longstanding metropolitan myths of an uncomplicated, undifferentiated ‘Europeanness’ – or, more specifically, Frenchness in this case – undergirding assumptions of (supra)national identity are forced to take account of this increasingly insistent doubleness that bridges both the cultural and the ethnic domains of metropolitan life. Ultimately, the basic definition of the composition of the nation state must be revisited and redefined, as the colonially driven tensions and insularities of empire at work in the periphery are increasingly superseded by a constantly metamorphosing metropolitan perspective. This positions a reductive posture of sameness and singularity to adopt a growing awareness and acceptance of otherness, predicated on an intermingling of ethno-cultural communities and a praxis of cosmopolitan empathy through an active engagement with difference.

**Caribbeanness and the Continent**

In a word, then, any reconsiderations of the complexities of creolized Caribbean and European identities will bring into play important concepts of location, migration, and cultural cross-fertilization in order to interrogate rigid assumptions of identity and place. Such a pluralist, historically inflected vision of Caribbean epistemology was in fact instantiated by one of the French Caribbean’s major contemporary literary and cultural theorists, the late Édouard Glissant of Martinique. While there have been major literary and critical movements that have both preceded and arisen out of his writing, the body of Glissant’s work easily stands alone, with major cultural, critical and philosophical implications for the ever-evolving of French metropolitan subjectivity. We will seek to disentangle the intersection of creolization and an increasingly transcultural Europe shortly, but for now it bears repeating that Glissant practiced a discursive positionality grounded in historical and contemporary patterns of migration and *mondialisation*, and their undergirding of the Glissantian principles of relation and creolization.

Long a towering figure in the world of arts and letters, Glissant’s unassailable global stature was confirmed in the decade before his death in
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2011 by the coalescence of a number of associated events. The Prix Édouard Glissant was created in 2002 at the Université Paris 8 (Vincennes-Saint-Denis) with the co-operation of l’Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) and the Réseau France Outre-mer (RFO), asserting his stature as a leading French public intellectual. The foundation of the Institut du Tout-monde in Paris in 2007, and the increasing publication of English-language translations of his work (translations of L’Intention poétique and La Case du commandeur have recently appeared), mark his emergence, beyond the French-speaking world, as an internationally recognizable literary figure. He also took a leading official role in setting up a Centre national pour la mémoires des esclavages et de leurs abolitions for the French state. Of a piece with these efforts are some of his more recent public pronouncements, like ‘Manifeste pour refonder les DOM’ (2000), ‘Quand les murs tombent: l’identité nationale hors-la-loi’ (2008), ‘L’Intraitable beauté du monde’ (2009), and ‘10 mai: mémoires de la traite négrière, de l’esclavage, et de leurs abolitions’ (2010), which addressed telling contemporary issues of identity and transnationality. Such documents do seem to make it clear that, even in this most late stage of his career, Glissant had not entirely abandoned the activist and oppositional politics that characterized his earlier career, most notably in the 1950s and 1960s, when he was forbidden by Charles de Gaulle from leaving France between 1961 and 1965.

Critical work on Glissant often divides his writing into two periods: before and after the publication of Le Discours Antillais in 1981. In the first period one might claim that he focuses mainly on Martinique and its social, political and cultural paradoxes, while in the second he extends his vision, via the concept of the ‘Tout-monde’, to the postcolonial world as a whole. His crosscultural poetics, then, initially articulated in Le Discours Antillais but greatly expanded in his Poétique de la relation, writes identity out of a historically and culturally grounded Antillean experience. The larger theoretical concept of ‘relation’ (la Relation), inscribes a non-hierarchical principle of mutuality, a relationship based on recognition of and respect for the Other as different from oneself. On a larger scale, the concept presupposes and valorizes a praxis of natural openness to other cultures. As Celia Britton explains:

Glissant’s theoretical work […] is all underpinned by la Relation. The starting point for this concept is the irreducible difference of the Other; ‘Relation’ is in the first place a relation of equality with and respect for the Other as different from oneself. It applies to individuals but more especially to other cultures and other societies. (Britton, 1999, 11)

Glissant envisions the poetics of relation as intrinsically intersectional and composite. While, on the one hand, it is ‘forever conjectural and grounded in no fixed ideology’, on the other, it also inscribes a space beyond the strictures of language and geography, since it is at the same time ‘latent,
open, and multilingual in intent’ (Glissant, 1997, 44). Ultimately, this poetics of relation becomes a means towards establishing a signifying framework that emphasizes coexistence and connection as a means towards thwarting difference and oppositionality.

From a Glissantian perspective, creolization almost always leads to unknown and unforeseeable consequences. Creolization emphasizes mobility and flux, subverting fixed and separate patterns of identity formation. It is to this end that Glissant supplanted the singular figure of the root by the rhizome as a pluralist spatio-cultural construct grounding the Caribbean heritage of creolization. The rhizomatic framework enables this last category to assume the plural, protean properties of its hybrid heritage, as its insistence on fragmentation and doubling explodes metropolitan concepts of rootedness and monoculture through the intrinsic diversity of its structure. Thus, instead of the self-reflexive notion of one root – grounded in singularities of nationality, language, and ethnicity – the rhizomatic, multiple-rooted identity will reflect a pluralized, inchoate world of migrant subjectivities in the chaos-monde. As Michael Dash puts it:

Relation [...] is opposed to difference and, more than in his previous essays, Glissant ranges beyond the Caribbean to describe a global condition. Indeed, one could say that he sees the entire world in terms of a Caribbean or New World condition. The world, for Glissant, is increasingly made up of archipelagos of culture. The Caribbean has become exemplary in this creative global ‘chaos’ which proliferates everywhere. (Dash, 1995, 22–23)

Such linkages allowed Glissant to avoid – indeed, to overcome – the inherent clichés and limitations of an anticolonialist theoretical position. If we are to understand the transformative processes currently driven by migratory and diasporic movements in Europe, clarifying the Glissantian vision of the intersection of relation, creolization and opacity will be of key importance in elaborating their material, symbolic and analytical frameworks and the corollaries attendant upon these categories.

As the relational discourses of Poétique de la relation gave way to the broader visions of the ‘Tout-monde’, Glissant’s framework for Caribbean creolization gradually gave way to a broader articulation of global intersectionality. As the basis for his conjunction of historical, social and spatial systems, it is the random, unpredictable concatenation of cultural patterns and praxes that gives rise to a Caribbean framework of creoleness. By scaling this vision to the ‘global village’, Glissant inscribes a discursive simultaneity of sameness and difference:

The creolization that is taking place in neo-America, and the one gaining strength in the other Americas, is the same as the one operating across the world [...] the world is creolizing, which is to say that as the cultures
of the world come into sudden and violent contact today they change and [...] abandon with difficulty something that they had held on to for so long, which is that identity is only valuable and recognizable if it excludes all other possible identities. (Glissant, 1996, 15; my translation)

It is this iteration of identitarian relationality, Glissant argues, already extant in the Caribbean region, that increasingly undergirds the multiple contacts and inflections of the world’s cultures. In these contemporary encounters between peoples, cultures and ethnicities, characterized by ‘macroclimates of cultural and linguistic interpenetration’ (Glissant, 1996, 19; my translation), he locates a creolization that actively contests the implicit binaries and hierarchies of the French colonial model of assimilation.

Given this intersubjective framework, Glissant sought to subvert and overturn metropolitan concepts of singular origin by supplanting the traditional figure of the root by the pluralist spatio-cultural construct of the rhizome, inscribing the latter as a grounding figure for the Caribbean heritage of creolization through the intrinsic diversity of its structure. Rather than singularities of nationality, language and ethnicity, then, the rhizomatic, multiple-rooted identity will reflect a pluralized, inchoate world of migrant subjectivities. Glissant always stressed the role of spatiality – of place, of location – over temporality, and in an interview entitled ‘Europe and the Antilles’ he explained the phenomenon thus:

We must have the courage to admit that identity conceived as a rhizome or as a form of relation is neither an absence of identity, a lack of identity, nor a weakness. It is a vertiginous inversion of the nature of identity [...] My own place which is inexorable, incontournable, I relate it to all the places of the world, without exception, and it is by doing so that I leave behind single-root identity and begin to enter into the mode of rhizomic identity, that is to say, identity-as-relation. (Hiepko, 2011, 259−260)

What undergirds Glissant’s discursive undertaking, then, is the translation of the colonial experience of the periphery into a framework for trans/national articulation that places a national identitarianism that draws on the singular strands of hexagonal history into question.

Such patterns are arguably also implicitly present in the global demographic and cultural shifts produced by colonialism and its aftermath, particularly their ongoing and interrelated patterns of migrancy and movement. Put another way, given the increasing porousness and fluidity of national borders, particularly in Europe, and their plural corollaries of ethnicity, language and nationality, the easy categorizations of race, class and nation to which we have become accustomed are being forced to give way to the recognition of ‘multiple subject positions’ as being more reflective of the postmodern condition of incessant fragmentation, mobility, doubling and displacement. On the other hand, with the forces of globalization
leading to ever-increasing patterns of heteronomy and assimilation, and as the flows of people and technology and the commodification of culture result in a conjunction of cosmopolitanism and deterritorialization in which social identity is bound up with shifting simultaneities of migrancy, belonging, citizenship, labor and ever-increasing numbers of (mainly third world) refugees, the post/colonial metropolis is increasingly being feted as a transformational and transactional cosmopolitan space where the empire writes back to the center. This engenders a locational paradox in which, as Françoise Vergès (2002, 356) writes, ‘There is now a pastoral of postcolonialism in which the city is the locus of transnational politics’. Within such a contested framework of cultural exchange, it is becoming increasingly clear that, both for les français de souche and their perceived Others, the possibility of allowing for new categories of Frenchness is an increasingly contested proposition.

**Difference, exclusion, immigration, identity**

If French colonialism and the *mission civilisatrice* were grounded in a praxis of enforced racial hierarchies, this praxis of hierarchy and exclusion, and their corollaries of difference, are precisely the attitudes that continue to bedevil the ‘postcolonial’. As Étienne Balibar (1984, 1745) points out, ‘Racism in France is essentially colonial, not in terms of a ‘leftover’ from the past but rather in terms of the continuing production of contemporary relations’. Put another way, France’s increasingly diverse postwar population – catalyzed early on both by the return of over a million pieds noirs from the nascent Algerian nation followed by a large influx of labor from the DOM of the periphery – drew on the hybrid cultural forms emerging from these new demographic patterns, along with their corollaries of polymorphous positionality, defying nationalist singularities in favor of multiple attachments. In this way, as Adrian Favell (2001, 94) suggests, these new citizens, marked and defined by their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic difference from the metropole, put paid to ‘the French post-revolutionary idiom’ with its emphasis on ‘republican citoyenneté and intégration’.

The traditional model of an all-inclusive, indeed, all-encompassing vision of francité, predicated as it is on a delegitimation of ethnic identity and the assumption of assimilation, continues to fall by the proverbial wayside.

On the other hand, the hexagonal perspective is also marked by the paradoxical fact that, by and large, the term ‘immigrant’ is not taken, for example, to refer to other Europeans like, say, the Portuguese, who presently constitute the predominant immigrant group in France. Rather, as Winifred Woodhull (1997, 32) succinctly points out, ‘it refers to the influx of non-Europeans, some of whom are not immigrants at all. These include people from France’s overseas departments in the Caribbean (Martinique and Guadeloupe), as well as from former French colonies such as Vietnam,
Senegal, Cameroon, and the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia). Thus, the very range of application and pejorative tenor of the French term *immigré(e)* implicitly incorporates all minority groups, regardless of demographic origin, into its folds. For example, as Freedman and Tarr (2000, 2) point out, ‘a woman who was born in France, has been brought up in French society and has French nationality, but whose grandparents originally migrated to France from Vietnam, for example, will still find herself labelled as an “immigrant.”’ The same is true of ethnic minority communities in France originating from Martinique and Guadeloupe, even though these are still French territories. Such patterns of difference and discrimination speak to an implicit, insistent whitening of the French state in discursive and ethno-cultural terms.

Such a phenomenon does not occur in a vacuum, to be sure, and in fact it denotes a willful blindness towards the long-established presence of black peoples on French soil. In an insightful essay, Tyler Stovall has outlined the basic tenets of this process:

> the historical context is crucial. In order for ideas of French national identity to take on a racialized character two particular developments were essential. One was the conclusive triumph of Republican values and institutions in France, emphasizing the global significance of Revolutionary ideology. The other was the creation of a significant nonwhite presence in France, a presence of both actual individuals and cultural representations of the Other. World War I brought about both developments, leading to an understanding of whiteness as a muted but nonetheless real part of French national identity during the early twentieth century. (Stovall, 2004, 53)

Much of this implicit inscription of whiteness as an integral part of France’s national identity was in turn predicated on France’s centuries-long colonial encounters in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb. Many of its racially based colonial hierarchies were, in a sense, imported into the hexagon’s vision of itself. Stovall continues:

> As relations in colonial society became more complex, the initial contrast between conqueror and conquered gave way to an understanding of race as a more important marker of the boundaries between colonizer and colonized. The best example of this was the debate over métissage in the colonies […] they were a source of danger precisely because they threatened the racialized boundary between colonizer and colonized. In contradiction to doctrines of universalism, therefore, the rejection of the métis was predicated upon a definition of Frenchness as whiteness, as discussions of the amount of white versus native blood in their bodies demonstrated. (Stovall, 2004, 55)
Colonialism, then, and its corollaries of slavery and racism, have played a major role in the varied theoretical and discursive frameworks that have created the fundamental concept of what it means to be black in modern Europe. Also coming under this rubric was the ever-increasing contingent of Antillean and sub-Saharan subjects moving to the metropole.

By navigating between these interrelated axes of transportation and displacement, it is possible to trace the presence of blacks on French soil all the way back to Roman times. Given this extended presence, it would be reasonable to conclude that France’s black cohort had achieved de facto integration within France’s vaunted universalist ethos. But, in fact, the opposite was the case, as Stovall succinctly explains:

Most of France’s black history has centered around two essential themes: (1) Colonial encounters and representations, from the slave trade and Caribbean plantations of the 17th and 18th centuries to the colonization of sub-Saharan African in the 19th and twentieth; and (2) Postcolonial migrations and settlements, primarily (but not only) during the twentieth century and especially after 1945. (Stovall, 2006, 202)

What arises clearly from this discursive framework is rather a stigmatization of the black presence in material terms, with blacks continuously corralled and categorized into stereotypes that extend and exacerbate their inscription in otherness, alterity and non-belonging. In other words, even as France itself evolved from a monarchy to a republic in which its people assumed the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and extolled the color-blind nature of French national identity, the continued denigration of blacks and other populations of color – ranging from the hundreds of thousands of non-white workers from China, North Africa and Indochina who arrived in France during World War I, to the post-departmental and postcolonial Antilleans and Africans who arrived after World War II – engendered material conditions that literally mimicked the racial hierarchies, stereotypes and exclusions that marked and grounded France’s colonial adventure. As Stovall (2004, 54) puts it, ‘the very nature of Frenchness was conditioned by race’. Given the pressing paradox of an imperial republic, then, any implicit creolization of the fundamental framework of French national identity flew in the face of the ongoing, insistent whiteness on which this identity was predicated, as populations and cultures from both center and periphery were thrown together in the maelstrom engendered by migration, post/colonialism and departmentalization.

In an important way, several key discourses of the nation – the philosophical, the cultural, the economic – worked in tandem to inhibit the implementation of a universalist France of equal rights and opportunities. Given this critically intersecting network of signification, nationalism, history, culture, even, or perhaps, especially literature, converge to give rise to a valorized inscription of identitarian Frenchness that functions within a
doubled framework of discourse and representation. In representing identity and its attendant hierarchies in this way, long-standing stereotypes are not contested, but rather confirmed, in a discursive matrix that ultimately implicates the state itself. As Stuart Hall explains:

Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation [...] because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity. (Hall, 1996, 4)

Clearly, despite the demonstrable presence and influence of a variety of immigrant groups on French soil, particularly from the onset of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the integrationist model could be upheld by falling back on the ‘whitening’ effect of European arrivants from the southern boundary of Europe, from countries like Italy, Greece and Spain. Their capacity to ‘pass’, effectively veiled their presence in comparison to the more visible presence of arrivants from North Africa and the former African and Caribbean colonies. In other words, ‘identity’, as a defining category, remained predicated on an all-inclusive sameness even as it was made to confront a fracturing and fissuring into ‘identities’ with the intersection of myriad ethnicities and cultures on French soil in the postcolonial era.

**Colonialism, creolization and opacité**

If Glissant’s discursive praxis actively contests patterns of othering, domination, appropriation and exclusion, then his work would stand in contradistinction to the metropolitan discourses we have been discussing. Indeed, nationalism and colonialism are precisely the values he holds in his sights, as Michael Dash (1995, 148) points out: ‘Glissant’s vision is different from earlier nationalisms and counter-discursive ideologies because it not only demystifies the imperialistic myth of universal civilization but also rejects the values of hegemonic systems’. In this way, Glissant arguably formulates those principles ‘of openness, of errance and of an intricate, unceasing branching of cultures’ (Dash, 1995, 147) that, in their contradistinction to metropolitan stigmatization of its minority peoples, would ultimately put this policy into question.

But, in a key sense, it is precisely this question of minority peoples and cultures, and their inscription and/or exclusion, which is at issue in the formulation of contemporary French identity. Indeed, given the
post-revolutionary precepts that are at the core of the republic, there are no minorities in France, only French citizens. The ironic décalage between this claim and the trenchant paradoxes of material reality are insistently pointed to by Françoise Vergès, ‘The French republican doctrine has always been extremely reticent to admit that race has played a role in the making of the Republic. It was as if admitting the role of race meant admitting the existence of “race”’ (Vergès, 2010, 95). And yet, from a historical perspective, France is in fact a nation shaped by patterns of political fragmentation and ethnic and cultural pluralism it has continually sought to efface, from the acquisition of the duchy of Brittany in the late Middle Ages to the return of Alsace-Lorraine by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. In these terms, the implicit whitening of the nation state, already referred to, became a means of forging national identity and national unity, achieved in part by papering over their tensions and fissures, such as those that ultimately joined Alsace-Lorraine and Corsica to France. Reading such patterns and praxes from the perspective of the nascent nation state, one can see clearly the instantiation of Renan’s (1990, 11) paradoxical dictum that, ‘Forgetting […] is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation […] Unity is always effected by means of brutality’. Carefully crafted national discourses, then, usefully and simultaneously engendered both superficial simulacra of sameness within the nation state, and discursive representations of difference and alterity that enabled and rationalized the colonial project among the state’s others in the periphery.

But such deliberate acts of forgetting persist and multiply, and the postcolonial French nation has seen its share of them in the last several years. On the political side, these unspoken tensions, and the unacknowledged, unaddressed colonial traces that lay at their core, erupted in the contested, controversial Law of February 23, 2005. In this remarkable legal document, the government, in Article 1, ‘exprime sa reconnaissance aux femmes et aux hommes qui ont participé à l’œuvre accomplie par la France dans les anciens départements français d’Algérie, au Maroc, en Tunisie et en Indochine ainsi que dans les territoires placés antérieurement sous la souveraineté française’.1 Article 4 goes even further, insisting that ‘Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l’histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l’armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit’.2 Interestingly, while there was little

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1 ‘seeks to recognize the women and men who participated in the task accomplished by France in the former French departments of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Indochina as well as in those territories formerly under French sovereignty’. My translation.

2 My translation: ‘scholarly programmes in particular should recognize the positive role of the French overseas presence, particularly in North Africa, and should give to the history and the sacrifices made by the armed forces of France stationed in
question that the demand to recognize the ‘positive role’ played by French colonialism amounted to a tacit, if not an overt, denial of the racist crimes of the colonial era – including such occulted events as the racially driven repression and massacre of Algerian protesters in Paris on October 17, 1961 – protests and accusations of historical revisionism were undertaken only by ‘left-leaning’ scholars, writers and activists until the law’s repeal by President Jacques Chirac at the beginning of 2006. In a case such as this, where willful blindness clearly trumps presumptions of insight, it is this perverse determination not to see that undergirds Vergès’s (2010, 94) telling observation that ‘It is within the French national body that we now observe the frame of French colonialism, the effect of postcolonial amnesia, of the return of the repressed […] the spectres of the colonial politics of race and gender, inhabit the contemporary French Republic’. Arguably, then, both whiteness and its mission civilisatrice are implicitly valorized within a postcolonial temporality of discursive rationalization.

But francité, by its very nature, excludes the ethnic and cultural claims of certain categories of citizens born on French soil, and, again, only the willfully blind would have no expectations of consequences. The suburban riots of 2005 are a case in point. In a key way, the economic, social and racial causes of this uprising are directly reflective of the burgeoning diversity of France’s population, emblematically embodied by the minority youth of the banlieues – and the refusal to recognize the implications of this pluralistic demographic shift for the discursive articulation of a wider, more inclusive vision of francité. As Catherine Wihtol de Wenden (2006, 51) points out, ‘encounters with daily instances of discrimination point to the unfulfilled promises of equality. The youths face inequality at school, segregation in housing, and discrimination in access to employment’. In other words, given the failure of the French political powers that be to integrate their Muslim and black populations into the larger framework of the French economy and culture, or to give them leave to voice specific identitarian claims, the unacknowledged racism that is the double marker both of the metropolitan majority and of the minority populations of color of the ‘cités’, bridged the double bind of exclusion and intégrisme that constitutes the core of the national framework.

France’s minority populations are effectively targeted and stigmatized, made subject to a discursive metropolitan network whose multiple sources reflect the range of the commitment to preserving the mythologized status quo of the integrated, universalist nation. These sources, ranging from politics to the media to the religious establishment, engage in clear patterns

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of persecution and pathologization of the periphery of French citizenry, as Silverstein and Tetreault point out:

In addition to drawing on this previous history of violent confrontations, the November 2005 disturbances responded to the symbolic violence perpetrated by politicians and journalists against young French citizens in cités who are repeatedly and mistakenly described as ‘foreigners’ (étrangers) and pathologized and demonized for their purported unwillingness to ‘integrate’ into French society Since the 1980s right-wing and centrist politicians have deliberately blamed French children of immigrants for their purported failure to integrate as a means of mobilizing conservative voters and deflecting responsibility for social inequities […] [this] is taken by many residents of the cités as yet another example of French society’s rejection of cultural and religious diversity and the hypocrisy of a Republic that would claim to treat all of its citizens equally. (Silverstein and Tetreault, 2006)

As this analysis makes clear, it would not be unreasonable to claim that the praxes of segregation, exclusion and hierarchical division associated with France’s colonial encounter as it was practiced in the periphery have returned to the metropole with a vengeance. As these colonially driven perceptions persistently and paradoxically divide the universalist nation against itself, they explain Vergès’s (2010, 94) point that ‘To the disenfranchised youth of France (both in the Hexagon and overseas territories), discrimination against their parents, against themselves, the perception that they remain “second-class citizens” […] all could be explained by “slavery, racism and the legacy of colonialism”’. Intriguingly, however, these problems are not limited to France’s socioeconomic and socio-cultural periphery, but indeed assail its geographical periphery as well.

DOMiens, citoyens?

It will come as no surprise that most across-the-board comparisons have shown that these supposedly equal territories are marked by a tangible series of ongoing economic disadvantages by comparison with France. And, indeed, the ethnicized framework of the nation state described above encounters even greater challenges when forced to confront and inscribe the unprecedented patterns of creolization spawned in the wake of France’s Caribbean colonial presence. Notwithstanding the act of departmentalization of 1946 that made citizens of the inhabitants of the DOMs, and set in train the instantiation of metropolitan social safety nets like the salaire minimum de croissance (SMIC) [minimum wage] and the allocation familiale, these territories continue to be marked by a persistent set of ongoing economic disadvantages by comparison with the mainland.
large part, unemployment has long remained at around 25 percent to 30 percent, compared with a rate of about 8 percent for the metropole. Departmentalization has also produced a modernized société de consommation, as domestic production has all but disappeared and over 90 percent of all goods consumed in the DOMs are now imported from France. Their elevated prices and the high cost of living across the board reflect the costs of transatlantic shipping, insurance and the like. Here, patterns of capital repatriation, increasing unemployment, conspicuous consumption and decreasing indigenous business ownership tended to reinforce impressions of a generalized subservience to the metropole that arguably accompanies French overseas departmentalization in the Caribbean. Indeed, it was a concatenation of these systemic hierarchical discrepancies between metropole and DOM – highlighted by dramatic differences in salary and cost-of-living indices and precipitated by the intolerably high price of gasoline – that led to the forty-four-day general strike in Guadeloupe that ended on March 4, 2009 and the accompanying thirty-eight-day strike in neighboring Martinique that ended on March 14, 2009. The fact that Guadeloupe, with its sky-high unemployment rate, is one of the poorest corners of the national territory is a phenomenon that tends to go largely unnoticed in the hexagon, papered over as it is by discourses of equality and paradisiacal tropical splendor. Sparked by protests over the inordinately high cost of living and what the locals call in Creole pwofitasyon, or dehumanizing exploitation for profit, protests quickly became island-wide, bringing economic life to a screeching halt and leading to mass demonstrations, torched cars and trashed stores. Eventually, an agreement was signed between the Paris-based government and a coalition of unions and other labor and social movements. The draft agreement, reached early in the morning of March 11, 2009, called for a €200 ($250 US) monthly wage increase for 47,000 low-wage-earners, with smaller increases for those with higher incomes, retroactive to March 1. Major business owners had already agreed to lower prices on roughly 400 basic necessities by 20 percent one month after stores reopened. The strikes exposed long-simmering tensions between workers on the island and the békés, a wealthy white minority descended from slave-era colonists who continue to control key industrial and commercial areas as well as imports and prices. Indeed, according to a recent documentary, the békés of Martinique control 20 percent of the island’s GDP as well as 52 percent of the agricultural land and 40 percent of the commercial distribution rights.4

In a subsequent poll by BVA/Orange, 78 percent of respondents considered the Guadeloupe protesters’ demands ‘justified’. But it is events such as these exposing the unpalatable reality lurking beneath presumptions

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4 See television documentary, ‘Les derniers maîtres de la Martinique’, dir. Romain Bolzinger, TAC Presse; transmitted January 1, 2009 (Canal+); February 6, 2009 (Canal+ Antilles).
of republican égalité and intégrisme that lead Vergès (2010, 94) to declare that ‘French overseas territories and ‘banlieues’ have emerged as sites where French national identity, the myth of the Nation, national narrative and national culture are questioned from the viewpoint of a still unwritten story: the story of slavery and of the ‘republican colony’. Significantly, it is the circulation of these long-held perceptions in both the geographical and the socio-cultural peripheries, that a de facto condition of colonization is the iron fist lurking within the velvet glove of departmentalization’s promises and assertions of equality, that grounds the understanding of these events by these exploited and excluded communities. For example, in an article dated March 2, 2009 that appeared on the weblog Montray Kreyol, entitled ‘De-link the Martinican case from that of other French colonies’, the Martinican novelist Raphaël Confiant explained the perception of departmentalization as a two-edged sword; here, he emphasized the need to

get out of the ‘departmentalization-assimilation’ system which has certainly drastically improved the quality of life and mediated the installation of a quality infrastructural network over the last fifty years, but which has ruined our economy. Which has made it literally disappear. Which has transformed it into a ‘pretext-economy’, according to Édouard Glissant’s formula; i.e., functioning thanks only to massive financial transfers from the metropole.5

Similar assertions of the socio-cultural specificity of the periphery were made by Elie Domota (2011, 48), one of the principal organizers of the LKP economic resistance movement in Guadeloupe, in an interview marking the two-year anniversary of the uprising:

We are proposing to go well beyond a simple material and moral defense of workers’ rights, and forcefully to pose questions of social transformation. Whether we like it or not, given our history, and given what links us to France and Europe, there are questions to be resolved.6


6 ‘Nous nous proposons d’aller bien au-delà de la simple défense des droits matériels et moraux des travailleurs, et de véritablement poser la question de la transformation
In this tacit recognition of the continuity of colonial hierarchies, which is simultaneously an acknowledgement of France’s lack of recognition of the porousness of any nationally grounded contemporary identitarian framework within a context of the pressing permeability of French and European national identities, an awareness of ongoing patterns of domination and submission is incontestably apparent, at least to the dominated. In the face of France’s refusal to countenance the contestation of its national framework by the antinomial forces of centralization and fragmentation set in train by the oppositional links between metropole and periphery, and exacerbated by creolization’s creatively unstable and mobile categories of subjectivity engendered in the aftermath of its colonial encounters, the ongoing transformation of the Hexagon into a contested site of subjective expression and pluralistic performance becomes an increasingly central – indeed, a largely unaddressed and unresolved – question.

Indeed, such claims of cultural autonomy, grounded in France’s historical relationship with its periphery and the conviction that similar hierarchies of domination and exclusion are at work in the present, have emanated almost ceaselessly from the geo-cultural boundaries of the French state. Prizewinning author Patrick Chamoiseau characterizes the broader stakes of the 2009 uprising in this way:

Martiniquais, Guadeloupéens, du fait de notre position dans la République, nous sommes non pas mal aimés, mais nous n’existons pas, nous sommes dans l’ombre, dans la cale du bateau […] ç’aurait été une erreur de rester sous-ordonnés, c’est-à-dire de rentrer dans un mécanisme qui est ordonné d’une administration à 7000 km, parce que c’est ce dont nous souffrons fondamentalement.7

In a sense, such pronouncements simply echoed and extended earlier ones. When Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy, (in)famous for his ‘racaille’ remark during the uprising in the banlieues, announced a brief visit to Martinique in late 2005, outraged public reaction included an open letter to Sarkozy in the newspaper Libération by Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant entitled ‘De Loin’ and dated December 7, 2005. This public missive was clearly aimed at exposing the willful blindness of the neocolonial policies and discourses that still undergirded French national identity politics:

sociale. Et qu’on le veuille ou pas, avec l’histoire que nous avons, avec ce qui nous lie notamment à l’Europe et à la France, il y a matière à luttes. My translation.

7 Chamoiseau, 2011, 163, 167: ‘Martinicans and Guadeloupeans, given our position in the Republic, it is not so much that we are unloved, but rather we do not exist, we are in the shadows, in the hold of the ship […] it would have been a mistake to remain subordinate, trapped in a mechanism run by an administration 7,000 kilometers away, because this marks fundamentally the root of our suffering.’ My translation.
La Martinique est une vieille terre d’esclavage, de colonisation, et de néo-colonisation [...] Il n’est pas concevable qu’une telle Nation ait proposé par une loi (ou imposé) [...] à masquer ses responsabilités dans une entreprise (la colonisation) qui lui a profité en tout, et qui est de toutes manières irrévocablement condamnable [...] les communautés d’immigrants, abandonnées sans ressources dans des ghettos invivables, ne disposent d’aucun moyen réel de participer à la vie de leur pays d’accueil, et ne peuvent participer de leurs cultures d’origine que de manière tronquée, méfiante, passive.8

Clearly, then, these opposing views distinguish the state’s view of its history, its culture, and its intersecting communities from that of its most peripheral citizens.

However, Glissant’s principle of opacité holds great potential for reconfiguring contemporary France’s composite metropolitan society. Glissant draws on Caribbean principles and praxes of colonial resistance to inscribe opacité as a key counter to the universalizing assumptions of Western colonial culture. He indicates the advantages of this alternative approach over Westernized totalizing systems of thought and action in Poétique de la relation:

The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths [...] it relativizes every possibility of action within me [...] saves me from unequivocal paths and irreversible choices [...]. And so I can conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him [...]. We claim the right to opacity for everyone.9

Here, Glissant’s discursive critique underlines the extent to which Westernized totalizing thoughts and attitudes can converge to engender a univocal France, one marked by an implicitly uniform ethnicity as well. Recognizing the opacity of the other as a discourse of difference inscribes new paths and possibilities for relational identity by effectively contesting dominant

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8 See Chamoiseau and Glissant, 2005: ‘Martinique is an ancient land of slavery, colonization and neocolonialism [...] It is inconceivable that the Nation should have sought by law [...] to hide its responsibilities in an undertaking (colonization) from which it profited, and which should be utterly and completely condemned [...] immigrant communities, abandoned in unlivable ghettos without resources, have no real means of participating in the life of their host country, and can only participate in their cultures of origin in a fearful, passive, and truncated way’. My translation.

9 Glissant, 1990, 206–207, 209: ‘La pensée de l’opacité me distrait des vérités absolues [...] elle relativise en moi les possibles de toute action [...] me garde des voies univoques et des choix irréversibles [...]. Je puis donc concevoir l’opacité de l’autre pour moi, sans que je lui reproche mon opacité pour lui [...]. Nous réclamons pour tous le droit à l’opacité.’
metropolitan assumptions and articulations of Frenchness through patterns of ethno-cultural intersection.

As he stresses the positive value of mixed, composite cultures, the valorization of communities grounded in diversity promotes ethnic formulations over national ones, in a dynamic, limitless multiplicity. Inscribing and expanding these multiplicities within the intersecting contexts of transnational communities inflected by migration holds intriguing implications for differential identity formation, as Mark Sebba and Shirley Anne Tate explain:

[W]e see identities as performed texts which are produced in talk and which are written in, into, and onto social reality by actors. They are constituted by social reality but also come to constitute that reality. These identities are never whole, complete or fully sutured and can therefore be subject to multiple readings and enunciations from different positions. (Sebba and Tate, 2002, 83)

Here, given the intricacies of a transgenerational migrant framework, identities are seen as texts of social practice that are reflective of the identifications that emerge from interactions between individuals. From a larger perspective, these (re)productions of global diasporic discourses of identity inscribe new positionalities and dimensions for reading transcultural encounters between various groups.

Devalorizing nationalité in favor of opacité allows us to find new ground for these composite cultures, their subversions of subjectivity and stereotype emerging from their differential inscriptions of meaning and identity in the newly multicultural, postcolonial metropole. As Glissant (1997, 193) himself observes, ‘The physical frontiers of nations have been made permeable to intellectual and cultural exchange, to mixed perspectives’.10 In this process, patterns of ethno-cultural difference located within and without national borders interact with and transform pre-existing designations of subjectivity, whether or not there is full and mutual recognition of the stubborn indicators of otherness. Celia Britton effectively explains the links that ground these concepts of relation, opacité, culture and resistance:

Accepting the other’s opacity means also accepting that there are no truths that apply universally or permanently. Relation and opacity work together to resist the reductiveness of humanism [...]. In this sense, opacity becomes a militant position [...] opacity is also a defense against understanding [...] The right to opacity, which Glissant claims is more fundamental than the right to difference [...] it is a right not to be understood. (Britton, 1999, 19)

10 ‘Les frontières physiques des nations ont été rendues perméables aux échanges culturels et intellectuels, aux métissages des sensibilités.’
Here, Glissantian thought reformulates the perception and the definition of the human, grounded in the idea that it is precisely the limits of the known that open up new horizons, leading to the limitless boundaries of the unknown. In this *schéma*, humanity is bounded by a sense of acceptance which is no longer grounded in transparency, but in an *opacité* seen as fundamentally subjective or cultural. In pursuing this train of thought, Britton (1999, 19) explains that 'understanding appears as an act of aggression because it constructs the Other as an *object* of knowledge'. In other words, difference as resistance should be allowed to assume its own subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

If, for Glissant, an inscription in the composite provides a direct link to the phenomenon of creolization, he extends this idea significantly when he (1996, 22) claims that 'I think that the term creolization applies to the world as it is today [...] where there no longer is any “organic” authority and where all is archipelago'. In this way, Glissant appropriates the driving principle behind the relationality of *la densité irréductible de l’autre* [*the irreducible density of the other*] to inscribe *opacité* both as a key armature of subjective resistance and as a counter to the universalizing assumptions of Western colonial culture. Such a vision disturbs longstanding and overarching concepts of nation and nationality, relegating them instead to secondary or, indeed, tertiary status as strategies of identity, subjectivity and belonging. From this perspective, their corollaries of artificial borders are abandoned in favor of the complexities of composite cultures and communities where intersecting pluralisms of language, food and music engender creative patterns of performance that go well beyond spaces of national belonging, dis-locating a metropolitan legacy of false universalism and flagrant exclusion, and rendering identity a shifting term in a network of multiple relations with Others who constitute it.

Opacity, as a strategy of understanding and (non)-recognition, assumes its full force within a resistive framework that contests colonial corollaries and their related hierarchies of domination and submission, as Patrick Crowley explains:

> The West, though understood as a project, can also be understood, specifically and historically, as colonial France which took overseas a version of Enlightenment thought that was instrumentalized and pressed into the service of power. The light of reason or, in Glissant’s view, the false light of universal models, informed, for example, the thinking of many

11 'Je pense que le terme de créolisation s’applique à la situation actuelle du monde [...] où il n’est plus aucune autorité “organique” et où tout est archipel.'
ethnologists, cartographers, teachers, administrators and urban planners
who sought to ‘understand’ the non-European. (Crowley, 2006, 107)

By elaborating on this critically paradoxical perspective that acknowledges
the limits of the knowability of the Other even as it presents these twin
tensions as an opportunity for the extension of the ethno-cultural framework,
he traces a network of progressive opacities whose material and symbolic
value is the potential that it poses to rethink both individual and group
subjectivity.

Ultimately, all cultures are formed, and are informed, through or with
the influence of other cultures. If creolization excludes no one, then there
can be no ‘pure’ original that can be used to rationalize or justify an attitude
or a positionality of domination, marginalization or exclusion. As Glissant
(1997, 194) writes in Traité du Tout-monde: ‘J’appelle créolisation la rencontre,
l’interférence, le choc, les harmonies et les disharmonies entre les cultures,
dans la totalité réalisée du monde terre’.12 By mediating and catalyzing a
broader vision of ethnic engagement with an almost infinite range of peoples
and cultures, the pluralities that inhere in this system of thought work to
assure the existence of a principle of exchange that itself also contributes
to establishing a framework for resistance in critical post/colonial and post/
national contexts. In this way, intersectionality – and its raft of implications
and corollaries – is increasingly privileged as undergirding new and infinite
possibilities for diversity and transformation on both the individual and the
communal levels.

If the simultaneity of sameness and difference within these linkages
allows Glissant to avoid the implicit binaries of responding to an anticolo-
nalist theoretical position, the creative possibilities of this position assume
even greater import in the urban, post/colonial spaces of contemporary
France, where migrant, transnational identities continue steadily to emerge
from the sterile hollowness of assimilation and integrationism. Forced to
confront, to recognize, and even to exist alongside the persistent traces
of an atavistic metropolitan colonial mentality, these displaced identities
are simultaneously mediated by a pattern of cultural and psychological
syncretism, engendering a process described by Kobena Mercer (2003, 255)
as one which ‘critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of
the dominant culture and creolizes them’ (emphasis in the original). This
psychosocial phenomenon repositions the universalist binary of self and
other, and plays a key role in the reshaping of urban France through
plural encounters that ground and enable new, hybrid forms of identity that
challenge the implicit singularities of francité. As a result, this new category

12 ‘What I call creolization is the encounter, the interference, the shock, the harmonies
and disharmonies between cultures, in the fully realized totality of our material world.’
My translation.
of subject – particularly given their location in the historically determinant post/colonial metropole – appropriates ‘these new political and cultural formations’, as Avtah Brah (1996, 209–210) puts it, so as ‘continually [to] challenge the minoritising and peripheralising impulses of the cultures of dominance’. Finally, if, as Homi Bhabha (1994, 213) claims, ‘double-lives are led in the postcolonial world, with its journeys of migration and its dwellings of the diasporic’, the challenge posed by this vision will require us to think of identity in new ways, leading ultimately to the global de-territorialization of nation, subjectivity and identity. This new way of thinking and envisioning Europe, yet to be fully realized, is the core of Glissant’s legacy.

Works Cited


