American Creoles

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Creolizations
Lafcadio Hearn’s American Writings and the Creole Continuum

Mary Gallagher

Les écrivains, de plus en plus, auront du mal à tracer leurs frontières. Signalons pour mémoire le cas extraordinaire de l’écrivain anglo-hellène, de nationalité américaine, Lafcadio Hearn qui, à la fin du XIXe siècle, recueillit les contes créoles de Louisiane et de la Martinique, vécut avec délices dans le Saint-Pierre d’avant l’éruption, publiant également des ouvrages pleins d’amour pour les paysages et les hommes martiniquais, paraissant un instant s’enraciner ici-là, avant de partir pour le … Japon où il épousa une femme du cru et écrivit des ouvrages en japonais. Homme à l’identité multiple, Lafcadio Hearn a eu l’intuition de la Diversalité.1

Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature, 1635–1975, pp. 169–70

1 ‘More and more often, writers will find it difficult to define the limits of their identities. We could quote from memory the extraordinary case of the Anglo-Greek writer of American nationality, Lafcadio Hearn, who, at the end of the nineteenth century collected the Creole folktales of Louisiana and Martinique, who lived with delight in pre-eruption Saint-Pierre and who also published works full of affection for the Martinican landscapes and peoples; Hearn seemed even to settle over here, before leaving for … Japan, where he married a local woman and wrote books in Japanese. As a man of multiple identities, Lafcadio Hearn had a premonition of “diversality”.

19
American Creoles

Lafcadio Hearn's Creole (Pre)Disposition

Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) is famous principally for having ‘interpreted’ Japan for the West in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Even if his life and work are recognized as falling into two main periods, the American and the Far Eastern, the latter is usually seen as outshining the former. It is less, however, the work of Hearn’s Japanese period than the inscapes of his American/Caribbean writings that hold the key – if not to the overall significance, then certainly to the contemporary resonance of this unusual fin-de-siècle figure and of his work. These writings are clearly founded on what one might call a Creole gravitation. The object of this study is to show how the expression of Hearn’s apparently inexorable Creole tropism illustrates a profound post-plantation cultural continuum which links the American Deep South to the Caribbean basin and also points forward to contemporary paradigms of cultural crossing, palimpsest or (as the authors of my epigraph put it, in a performative neologism) ‘diversalité’.

Not only does the idea of cultural continuum have, according to that epigraph, contemporary and universal purchase, but it is originally associated with specifically Creole spaces. The epigraph is a quotation from Lettres créoles, a literary survey of ‘Creole literature’ co-authored by two contemporary Martinican authors, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant. Emphasizing the notion of continuum as a denial or cancellation of borders, the two Martinicans claim that it is becoming more and more difficult to ‘confine’ writers of the contemporary age within a single, simple label. Their complex identities and their mobility defeat efforts to contain them within the boundaries set by a single national, ethnic or cultural tradition. In that sense, the authors of Lettres créoles claim Hearn for Creole letters, identifying him as having been almost a century ahead of his time. His refusal, or failure, to settle within (or for) just one place, culture, nationality, language etc. illustrates the extent of his engagement with cultural interrelation or ‘diversalité’, an engagement to which he may appear to have been predestined by the plurality of his mixed family origins and by the instability of his childhood and early life.

In his preface to a recent edition of Hearn’s Two Years in the French West Indies, Confiant makes three claims about Hearn. First, ‘though largely ignored by historians of English and American literature, [he] is one of the most modern writers of the second half of the nineteenth century’. Secondly, he ‘displayed a visionary conception of personal identity’ (which Confiant links to his ‘unusually mixed parental origins’). And thirdly, he ‘invented what today we might call “multiple identity” or “creoleness”’ (Hearn, 2000...
Lafcadio Hearn’s American Writings and the Creole Continuum

[1890]: ix–xii). However hyperbolic this latter claim might seem, Confiant makes it with some authority as one of the three author-signatories of the vastly influential pamphlet *Éloge de la Créolité* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant 1989).  

In the present chapter, Hearn’s writing trajectory will be shown to outline the basis of the Creole cultural continuum and to suggest the manner in which that continuum might cancel the boundaries between different geographical spaces, states, nations, cultures, genres and languages. Hearn’s work will also be shown, however, to undermine what we might be tempted to regard as the limits of the Creole continuum itself: in other words what we might want to see as separating the Creole continuum from what lies beyond or outside it. To begin with, however, the questions studied here relate not to this latter, expanded heuristic paradigm of ‘Creoleness’, but more specifically to Hearn’s interest in the parameters of the Creole world *per se*. When did Hearn first feel drawn towards these parameters? Which latent tensions or dynamics within his own background or constitution might have programmed this fascination with Louisiana and the Caribbean, leading him to devote more than twelve years of his life to these pre-eminently Creole locations? Which parts of his literary odyssey can be identified as Creole? Are the Ohio writings, which preceded his Creole sojourns, and perhaps even the Japanese work, which succeeded them, in some way related to his Creole gravitation? 

More than most other labels of cultural identity, the term ‘Creole’ opens up highly complex questions of (inter-)cultural identity, difference and relation (see Stewart, 2007). ‘Creoleness’ is primarily the cultural consequence of the colonial expansion of Europe in the so-called ‘New World’. Hearn’s New Orleans writings explicitly address from early on the problematic semantics of the term ‘Creole’. In an article entitled ‘Los criollos’, he writes about the plurality of definitions offered for the expression, most of them place-sensitive and many more race-sensitive. Hearn’s article is impressively well informed and lucid for its time and shows that he was well aware of the complexity and ambiguities of the trans-linguistic and inter-linguistic connotations of this most slippery of signifiers, even if some of these connotations were constants: linguistic associations with the creolization of French and Spanish especially; associations with particular places (the American South, but also South and...

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2 Confiant’s Foreword (p. xii) is entitled ‘Lafcadio Hearn: The Magnificent Traveler’.  
3 Gallimard subsequently published a bilingual (French/English) edition.  
4 ‘Los criollos’ appeared in 1877 in the *Cincinnati Commercial* just months after Hearn’s arrival in New Orleans.
Central America and the Caribbean); and, of course, most fundamentally an association with the moral and political catastrophe of slavery and with the racial and cultural combinations and relations founded on the coercive colonial history of transportation and exploitation. Hearn’s article emphasizes in particular what he represents as the correct understanding of the term as deployed in Louisiana to refer exclusively to the descendants of the white French and Spanish aristocracy of the old South, now in decline. However, as his writings on and from the Caribbean clearly show, Hearn would himself use the term ‘Creole’ in a much less exclusive sense. It is no accident that the title of Hearn’s article is in Spanish rather than English, for he was well aware of the fact that creolization was linguistically and culturally, if not ethnically or racially, a phenomenon pre-eminently associated with Latin, Mediterranean or Southern cultures. Indeed, as we shall see further on, in Hearn’s explicit view the more Southern cultures blended or mixed much more intensively and successfully than did the more Northern English population, language and culture. However, as Hearn’s mastery of Spanish was minimal in comparison with his knowledge of French, he naturally tended to dwell more on the French-Creole than on the Spanish-Creole world. Indeed, Hearn’s francophilia seems to have been a key factor in his Creole tropism. Not only does his own work suggest that he had a keen interest in French (some of his most specifically literary labours were in the area of literary translation from the French), but his paternal uncle, Richard Hearn, had painted with the Barbizon School in France and Hearn later claimed that he himself had been educated for a time in France. Some of his biographers have decided that he spent a year at school in Yvetot (where Guy de Maupassant was also a pupil) although there is no evidence to substantiate that claim nor has any proof been adduced to the effect that he ever spent any significant period of time in France at all.

If one of the major fixations of Hearn’s entire ‘American Period’ was on the racial, cultural and aesthetic legacy of the New World plantation, he

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5 Hearn’s use of the term ‘Creole’ is not systematic. It is sometimes capitalized, but usually not, even when it refers to the Creole language, and is certainly not used exclusively in the narrow sense which is presented in ‘Los criollos’ as its most authentic meaning. See, for example, in ‘Martinique Sketches’, the reference to the ‘creole negress or mulattress’ (Hearn, 2009: 446).

6 Although many of his translations from the French appeared in periodicals, Hearn also published book-length translations of stories by Gautier, France and Maupassant, the first being the Gautier translation. See Works Cited for details.

7 For the most recently published overview of Hearn’s French connection, see Lemoine, 2006.
Lafcadio Hearn’s American Writings and the Creole Continuum

was particularly obsessed, then, with the Francophone and Hispanophone contexts, which gave rise to much more intense mixing or métissage. The general post-plantation obsession pre-dated, however, his move to New Orleans or to the Caribbean and, in this sense, Ohio seems to have offered him a proto-Creole experience.

If creolization was a direct consequence of colonial displacement and transportation, Hearn’s affinities with Creoleness can be attributed in part at least to the texture of his own colonial and peripatetic origins and to his mixed descent and inheritance. Having been born in 1850 on the island of Levkas to a Greek mother and an Anglo-Irish surgeon in the British army, stationed in the Ionian Isles, Hearn’s early childhood was marked by a radical and serial experience of dislocation and discontinuity. He was transplanted at the age of about three from his native Greece to Ireland and abandoned there by both his mother and father. He had little or no further contact with his father, who moved to India and started a second family, nor with his mother, who moved back to Greece and did likewise. To these factors of dislocation and dispossession as an orphan raised in Dublin by a widowed and childless great-aunt, must be added his education at boarding school in Durham, whence he drifted in his later teens to London and thence to New York.

**Hearn’s Literary Trajectory in America**

Following the unsettled upbringing outlined above, Hearn emigrated to the United States in 1869 at the age of nineteen. He made his way to Cincinnati, home to a family contact of his Dublin grand-aunt and guardian, where he found work in the printing and publishing industry. He was hired in late 1872 as a reporter on the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Hearn’s copy for the *Enquirer* was not notably ‘literary’ or ‘aesthetic’ in orientation. It consisted indeed almost exclusively in prosaic reporting, although his literary inclinations surfaced in some of his more sensational or lurid articles. Most significantly, however, Hearn’s work from this period suggests that he was drawn especially by the socially or ethnically marginalized and displaced. He thus reported not only on the dockland proletariat and on its squalid rim of prostitutes and criminals, but in particular on the ‘black’ ghettos around the levees, inhabited primarily, according to him, by the displaced ex-slaves of Kentucky and by other diasporic and minority communities – Irish, Italian and Jewish, for example. It was not simply the exotic aura of otherness surrounding the marginalized, the outlaw or the outcast that attracted him, but also the exoticism of racial difference and mixture and the dynamic of post-slavery (im)migration. The headlines of his Ohio journalism give a sense of the
American Creoles

strength of this fascination, as does the fact that he married Mattie Foley, a black ex-slave with Irish connections. The marriage was short-lived, however, and, perhaps partly because of the cloud caused by his flouting of the colour code, Hearn ultimately left Cincinnati for the Deep South, and New Orleans. However, although the Cincinnati Enquirer dismissed him, perhaps for reasons related to his ‘illegal’ mixed-race marriage, a rival newspaper, the Cincinnati Commercial hired him and it was while he was still employed by the Commercial that he moved to New Orleans via Memphis. While he filed a significant amount of copy for the Cincinnati Commercial, it was more travel writing than reporting as such, and eventually, after that newspaper hired a different Louisiana correspondent, Hearn began to work for the New Orleans Item. Subsequently, however, he was appointed as Literary Editor of the New Orleans Times-Democrat, a position that gave him an opportunity to spread his literary wings. Nonetheless, most of the work that he published during his time both in Ohio and in Louisiana, not just in the local press but also in national periodicals such as Harpers, The Cosmopolitan, The Atlantic Monthly etc., and most of his American book-length publications also can best be regarded as amateur ethnography (avant la lettre). Even the titles of his articles and volumes convey this crypto-ethnographic perspective, a perspective that both enacts and highlights inter-cultural and inter-ethnic contact. Hearn’s proto-ethnographic work in New Orleans includes, then, in addition to the prolific output of (journalistic) sketches, a Creole cookery book and a book of Creole proverbs (giving transcriptions of the Creole original along with their English translation), and it also includes the first of the two novellas that constitute his only attempts at literary fiction, a short narrative entitled Chita. The more elevated cultural tenor of Hearn’s New Orleans writing emerges clearly from even a cursory comparison of the titles of his Ohio sketches with those of the New Orleans portraits: in Louisiana he no longer frequents the underworld of prisons, drinking dens, dumps or slaughterhouses in search of copy.

It was only a small ethnological step from the Franco-Creole world of New Orleans to the pre-eminently Creole world of the Caribbean. In the summer of 1887, Hearn embarked from New York on a Caribbean cruise,

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8 For example, ‘Within the Bars. How Prisoners Look, Live, and Conduct Themselves: Some Glimpses of Life in the County Jail’; ‘Some Pictures of Poverty: Impressions of a Round with an Overseer of the Poor’; ‘Haceldama: Hebrew Slaughterers, Gentile Butchers, and Consumptive Blood-Drinkers’.

armed with a commission from *Harper’s Magazine*. His account of the trip, entitled *A Midsummer Trip to the Tropics*, appeared in that publication in 1888. A short time after his return from the Caribbean journey, Hearn went back to Martinique where he would spend almost two years. He wrote up this experience as a series of portraits of life on the tiny French Caribbean island, and went on to publish them in 1890 under the title *Martinique Sketches* along with the relatively brief account of the inaugural Midsummer trip, in a single tome entitled *Two Years in the French West Indies*. Most of these sketches have French titles: ‘Les Porteuses’, ‘La Guiablesse’, ‘La Vérette’, ‘Un Revenant’, although some have titles in Creole (‘Pa Combiné, Chê’). Some contain transcriptions/translations of Creole songs and stories, and all document the local way of life and local expression and belief. Although some of these pieces were published in *Harper’s Magazine* while Hearn was still in Martinique, he also brought back to the United States material that he had collected and drafted in Martinique, including the material for his second novella, *Youma*, a story of the role of slavery in Martinican plantation slavery and also his transcriptions of Creole folktales (Hearn, 1939; 2002: published posthumously in the Creole version with a French translation by the editors of the two volumes concerned).¹⁰

**An Ethnographic Poetics**

*The Ethnographic Continuum of Hearn’s American Writings*

As the brief bibliographical summary above indicates, the American period of Hearn’s writing career encompasses both literature and journalism, both prose fiction and travel writing, both transcriptions of folklore and literary translation. However, even if a clear generic distinction can be made between fiction, travel writing and journalistic sketches, what unites Hearn’s practice of all three genres is both an ethnographic focus and the object of that focus. The continuity of Hearn’s American writings from Ohio to Martinique is based on his documentation of the ethos and aesthetic of the folk culture that emerged from plantation slavery.

Hearn’s American writings include three particularly striking travel accounts. The first recounts his journey South to New Orleans from Ohio via Memphis; the second records his journey to and within the Caribbean (‘A Midsummer Trip to the Tropics’); and the third his ‘A Winter Journey to Japan’.¹¹ In this sense, his work bears out Mary Louise Pratt’s assertion

¹⁰ For a study of the importance of folk narratives in Hearn’s work, see Gallagher, 2010.

¹¹ ‘Memphis to New Orleans’, *Cincinnati Commercial*, 23 November 1877; ‘A
that ‘by the late nineteenth century [...] two [writing] modes [narrative and description] often had about equal weight in travel books, and [that] it was common for a trip to result in two separate volumes’ (Pratt 1986: 35). The fact that the travel accounts were followed in all three cases by an extraordinarily prolific series of sketches of the way of life of the traveller-become-ethnographer confirms Pratt’s observation that ‘the authority of the ethnographer over the “mere traveller” rests chiefly on the idea that the traveller just passes through, whereas the ethnographer lives with the group under study’ (ibid.: 38). Hearn’s use of informants in New Orleans and in Martinique and his emphasis on the importance of cultivating them (and more generally of living with and among the people whose culture he is studying); his emphasis too, especially in Martinique, on the latter’s non-literacy, underlines the modelling of Hearn’s writing on the anthropological paradigm of observer-participation. Similarly, his rehearsal of other conventions of traditional anthropology/ethnography such as a transitive authorial perspective on the objectified culture, the latter’s construction as ‘other’ (often as ‘primitive’ or ‘underdeveloped’), the utopian undertones of that construction and the anticipated nostalgia in the future anterior tense, further confirm the resonance of the traditional anthropological/ethnological paradigm in Hearn’s writing. The primacy of Hearn’s ethnographic focus is indeed confirmed by Simon Bronner’s edition of selected texts by Hearn belonging to his Ohio and New Orleans periods: a volume entitled *Lafcadio Hearn’s America* and subtitled *Ethnographic Sketches and Editorials*. As Bronner recognises, the ethnographic specificity of Hearn’s writing relates in great part to his object: the underside of contemporary urban life in America. Hearn’s ethnological object is in line with the ethnological paradigm of his day in that its predominant orality and its marginality could only be constructed as other in relation to the dominant, analysing culture. Yet that object was out of line with the ethnological paradigm of the day in that it was in many respects coeval (economically integrated into its industrial context) and geographically ‘to hand’, and above all in that it was in no sense ‘other’ or ‘primitive’ in the sense of ‘pure’ or ‘untouched’, but was rather thoroughly mixed or ‘contaminated’ by contact with the culture viewed as ‘standard’. Although there is no indication of any real identification on Hearn’s part with his ‘ethnographic’ object in Ohio, his writing on New Orleans and on Martinique certainly suggests an affinity or a fascination bespeaking transient desire and even, perhaps, moments of transference. However, although in some of his New Orleans correspondence Hearn signs himself the recipient’s ‘creolised

friend, he rarely ever blurs the insider/outsider distinction. His is a position not just of exteriority but also of assumed superiority. This is expressed less, however, as a racial or political superiority, than as the cultural superiority of the ethnographer qua writer and of the latter’s penetrative, encompassing, comparative and aesthetic intelligence.

The Continuity of Hearn’s Ethnographic Object

The ‘otherness’ of the object of Hearn’s ethnographic attention is especially over-determined in the French-Creole context. The groups that he describes in Cincinnati, although they belong to a socially subordinate stratum and are often confined to the racial and cultural ghettos inhabited by ex-slaves, are mostly English-speaking, even if Hearn is at pains to document the local peculiarities of the English dialect that they speak. It is, moreover, the presence of the Irish overlay in that ‘ex-slave’ dialect that interests Hearn rather than the intrinsic aesthetic quality of the language. In contrast, the culture and language of the inhabitants of New Orleans and Martinique, although they similarly are from the collapsed American plantation culture, are constructed by Hearn as uniquely attractive and refined. For him, the two key attractions of the Creole culture of Louisiana and the Caribbean are its aesthetic grace, based on a higher degree of mixture or blending than in the Anglophone contexts of the Ohio ghettos or the Kentucky plantations, and the inherent qualities of the old French- or Spanish-influenced colonial worlds in which that culture was formed. Two further factors distinguish Hearn’s ethnographic perspective on the post-plantation world of New Orleans and Martinique from his focus on the post-plantation population of the Cincinnati ghettos: first, the latter’s greater temporal proximity to, and greater spatial distance from, slavery: the ex-slaves of the Cincinnati levees had moved to Ohio directly from slavery on the plantations of Kentucky and other more ‘deeply’ Southern states; secondly, the role opened up for the imagination. Hearn is particularly inclined to flights of fancy that convert the real New Orleans or Martinican scene to an imagined, remembered, or dreamed one. Because his writing on the Franco-Creole world constantly veers from description to imagination, his processing of his impressions of that world is not restricted as it is in Ohio to factual reportage. Instead, both in New Orleans and in Martinique, Hearn attempts not only to document a given culture, but also to unearth its latent references by comparing it, for example, to the worlds of Ancient Greece and Rome and to use it as inspiration for literary creativity. In fact, Hearn’s only two forays into literary

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12 This is how Hearn signs a letter that he wrote to Krehbiel from New Orleans in 1883 (Bisland, 1906: 280).
American Creoles

fiction were based on his research into life on Grande Isle and into the specifics of Caribbean slavery.

Hearn sees this work as providing, above all, a record of post-plantation American folk culture, especially language and oral production. Despite the gulf between the Ohio levee, the French Quarter of New Orleans and the island of Martinique, his descriptions of his collection and transcription of oral culture in all three locations are, in several respects, strikingly analogous. In Cincinnati he dwells in particular on the English dialect of levee culture. Thus, in ‘Levee Life: Haunts and Pastimes of the Roustabouts’, he phonetically transcribes the lyrics of the songs sung by one Jim Delaney: ‘One fact worth mentioning about these negro singers is that they can mimic the Irish accent to [...] perfection’ (Hearn, in Bronner, 2002: 45). Similarly, shortly after arriving in New Orleans he writes to his musicologist friend Henry Krehbiel of a ‘black nurse’ who sings a ‘voodoo song’, which she herself does not understand. ‘I tried to write down the words, but as I did not know what they meant I had to write by sound alone, spelling the words according to the French pronunciation’ (Hearn, 2009: 780). His ambition in New Orleans is, therefore, just as it had also been in Ohio, to document the local language and to collect local folklore: He adumbrates ‘a project which I hardly hope to succeed in, but which I feel some zeal regarding [...] to collect the Creole legends, traditions, and songs of Louisiana’ (Hearn, 2009: 780). In another letter from New Orleans, dated 1881, he again mentions this project to Krehbiel: ‘I should like one day to talk with you about the possibility of contributing a romantic [...] series of little sketches upon the creole songs and colored creoles of New Orleans, to some New York periodical’ (ibid.: 790).

Hearn’s perspective is strikingly similar in Martinique. In his ‘Martinique Sketches’ (1890) he frequently refers to his efforts to live close to his sources. Thus, at the beginning of ‘La Vérette’, he writes of his good fortune in finding accommodation in Saint-Pierre, noting that ‘the poorer the neighbourhood, the better one’s chance to see something of its human nature’ (Hearn, 2009: 339). In another sketch, entitled ‘Yé’ (1890), he writes of having ‘succeeded in getting [stories] dictated’ – stories that he heard children telling to each other in the street ‘every night, just before bedtime’ (Hearn, 2009: 514).

The continuity of Hearn’s ethnographic project in all three locations is clear. What is also clear, however, from his correspondence and from his publication of the two novellas Chita (researched from New Orleans) and Yourna (researched in Martinique) is that he harboured in addition more creative literary ambitions, which he was tempted originally to see as an

13 This letter to Krehbiel is dated 1878, just one year after Hearn arrived in New Orleans.
escape from, or as a more amenable alternative to, the rigours and costs of research. As early as 1881, he had written to Krehbiel from New Orleans, ‘I could not write one little story of antique life really worthy of the subject without such hard study as I am no longer able to undertake and a purchase of many costly works above my means. The world of Imagination is alone left open to me. It allows of a vagueness of expression which hides the absence of real knowledge, and dispenses with the necessity of technical precision of detail’ (Hearn, 2009: 792).

An Aesthetics of Physical and Linguistic ‘Métissage’

Although each set of writings is written in a slightly different key, with a clear modulation of tone and language from one to the next, the object of Hearn’s ‘ethnographic writings’ shows a certain constancy from Ohio to New Orleans to Martinique. This is not simply because of a common focus on ‘port cultures’ of the Atlantic World. It is also because of a deeply rooted fascination with America’s colonial past, specifically the world of the plantation as dominated by slavery and by racial hierarchy, and an equally clear obsession with the legacy of that past, more specifically with an aesthetics of métissage and with the specificity of the oral, folk culture yielded by that world (especially language, music, songs, stories, dance etc.). Hearn was particularly transfixed by the depth of the inter-ethnic and inter-linguistic palimpsest that distinguished post-plantation culture. Three Ohio texts clearly illustrate this double preoccupation with métissage and with cultural specificity. The first is entitled ‘Pariah People: Outcast Life by Night in the East End. The Underground Dens of Bucktown and the People Who Live in Them’ and it clearly underlines Hearn’s aesthetic sensitivities. His references both to slave culture and to an aesthetics of miscegenation are clear in the following description:

negresses, stronger than men, whose immense stature and phenomenal muscularity bear strong witness to the old slave custom of human stock breeding; neatly built mulatto girls, with the supple, pantherish strength peculiar to half-breeds; slender octoroons, willowy and graceful of figure, with a good claim to the qualification pretty, – will all be found among the crowd of cotton-turbaned and ebon-visaged throng, who talk alike and think alike and all live and look alike. (Bronner, 2002: 89)

14 ‘Pariah People’ was published in the Cincinnati Commercial on 22 August 1875. It is reprinted in Bronner, 2002. Italics are mine in this and all subsequent quotations, unless otherwise indicated.
The focus on the bounded specificity of ex-slave culture is much sharper in the following quotation, taken from ‘Levee Life’. Hearn is at pains to point out the ‘intense uniqueness’ of this particular way of life, its ‘peculiarities’, which are of a ‘strictly local quality’. What he wants to stress is its quiddity: ‘its boundaries are most definitely fixed’:

Roustabout life in the truest sense is, then, the life of the colored population of the Rows, and partly, of Bucktown – blacks and mulattoes from all parts of the States, but chiefly from Kentucky and Eastern Virginia, where most of them appear to have toiled on the plantations before Freedom; and echoes of the old plantation life still live in their songs and their pastimes. You may hear old Kentucky slave songs chanted nightly on the steamboasts, in that wild, half-melancholy key peculiar to the natural music of the African race, and you may see the old slave dances nightly performed to the air of some ancient Virginia-reel in the dance-houses of Sausage Row, or the ‘ball-rooms’ of Bucktown. There is an intense uniqueness about all this pariah existence, its boundaries are most definitely fixed; its enjoyments are wholly sensual, and many of them are marked by peculiarities of a strictly local character. Many of their songs which have never appeared in print, treat of levee life in Cincinnati of all the popular steamboats running on the ‘Muddy Water’. (Bronner, 2002: 38)\(^{15}\)

In the third sketch, ‘Black Varieties’, Hearn particularly admires the ethnic diversity, the racial and cultural variation of the population: ‘Every conceivable hue possible to the human skin might be studied in the dense and motley throng that filled the hall’ (Bronner, 2002: 171).\(^{16}\) He does highlight also, however, the pleasing ‘Southern’ style of the women’s dress and appearances: “There were full-blooded black women, solidly built [wearing] handkerchiefs of divers colors twined about their curly pates, after the old Southern fashion’ (Bronner, 2002: 171). Not only are aesthetic concerns at the heart of Hearn’s writing on the Bucktown ghettos, but even if the population and its way of life are unique, they do recall an ‘other’ time, acting as ghostly reminders of plantation slavery.

Although exactly the same interests and values recur in Hearn’s New Orleans and Caribbean writings, they are expressed there in different terms. The population and the culture of New Orleans are represented as being considerably more elevated or refined than those of Cincinnati. The

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\(^{15}\) From ‘Levee Life: Haunts and Pastimes of the Roustabouts’, an article first published in the *Cincinnati Commercial*, 17 March 1876.

animalistic comparisons disappear, and although the inhabitants of the city are still racially labelled and objectified, the descriptions are expressed in less (to later ears, repugnantly) zoological and pseudo-scientific terms; the latter register is replaced by a more ‘artistic’ or ‘aesthetic’ one. The tone of gothic grotesque gives way to pervasive allusion to ancient Greek and Rome. It is the ‘French quarter’ and the French and Spanish aesthetic influences that are singled out for particular aesthetic admiration in New Orleans, while, in the Caribbean writings, the Creole-speaking islands, particularly those with surviving French or Spanish Creole cultures, are singled out for praise denied to the language and culture of the English-speaking islands such as Barbados, whose atmosphere Hearn regards as inherently less mixed, less various and (consequently) less aesthetic than that of the French- or Spanish-Creole-speaking islands. Of the Barbadian population, Hearn writes that ‘as a mass, [it] strikes one as the darkest of the West Indies [...] by no means an attractive population, physically, – rather the reverse and frankly brutal as well – different as possible from the colored race of Martinique’. Hearn also comments on the ‘purity of Barbadian English’ and on the fact that ‘the commonest negro laborer about the port pronounces as well as a Londoner’ (Hearn, 2009: 213–14).

Hearn’s literary and linguistic francophilia has already been noted in relation to his translation work. However, it also emerges in his reporting on the Cincinnati ghettos: thus, in ‘Pariah People’, Eugène Sue’s Les Mystères de Paris is the comparator for the ‘hideous haunts’ (Bronner, 2002: 90) of Bucktown. This French orientation extends even to the journalism based on the poorest of the poor in Cincinnati, the scavengers on the dumps, since he gives a French title, ‘Les Chiffonniers’, to his article and compares their way of life to the art of Gustave Doré: ‘a fantastically dismal and darksome poetry’ (Bronner, 2002: 97). However, not even these French comparators can elevate the sights and sounds of Bucktown as high as the pedestal on which Hearn puts the French- and Spanish-influenced cultural aesthetic of parts of New Orleans and of the Caribbean. Apart entirely, however, from his praise of the inherent musicality of French and French Creole, Hearn’s New Orleans and Caribbean writings themselves become more and more marked by the presence of French words and expressions. Several explicit comments on French, English and Creole, as spoken in New Orleans and the Caribbean, are most revealing in this respect. In ‘The City of the South’, one of the first pieces that he wrote in New Orleans, he notes that ‘a large proportion of the

17 ‘Les Chiffonniers: Rags, Wretchedness and Rascality. The Gnomes of the Dumps, How they Live, Work, and Have their Being’ was published in the Cincinnati Enquirer, 26 July 1874.
lodging houses here are kept by colored women. Especially is this the case in the French Quarter. All these colored concierges speak both French and English. Their English, often deficient, is invested with the oddest French accent imaginable. He goes on to claim, however, that the French language sounds to me far more natural than our own in a black mouth, [because it is] beyond the power of Ethiopian lips to master [...] rugged sounds [and because] French is barren of rugged sounds’ (Starr, 2001: 15).

Revealing that he had already been attracted to the Creole language before he had ever set foot in America, he outlines his view of Caribbean Creole as constituting the nec plus ultra of New World dialects.

Yesterday evening, the first time for ten years, I heard again that sweetest of all dialects, the Creole of the Antilles. I had first heard it spoken in England by the children of an English family from Trinidad, who were visiting relatives in the mother country and I could never forget its melody. In Martinique and elsewhere it has almost become a written dialect; the schoolchildren used to study the Creole catechism and priests used to preach to their congregations in Creole. (Starr, 2001: 16)

Caribbean Creole is characterized as intrinsically ‘poetic and musical’: ‘the most liquid, mellow, languid language in the world, especially a language for love-making’ (Starr, 2001: 16). To his ears it ‘sounds like pretty baby talk’ and ‘seems to be a mixture of French, a little Spanish and West African dialects’ (ibid.). In contrast, ‘[t]he patois of Louisiana is not nearly so soft [and is] simply corrupted French’ (ibid.).

We have already noted that the ex-slave songsters of the levee use an English overlaid with an Irish accent and with pronunciation patterns specific to people of African descent. However, the levee language that Hearn transcribes is almost standard English with only slight variations in phonetic transcription registering what is represented as an Irish accent being mimicked by the singers. If this Levee dialect is regarded less favourably than the Louisiana patois which is denigrated in turn in relation to Caribbean Creole, this is because of the greater degree of métissage, blending or palimpsest at work and also because of the mellifluous musicality French in comparison to the more abrasive sounds of English.

18 ‘The City of the South’ was first published in the Cincinnatii Commercial on 10 December 1877. It is reprinted in Starr, 2001: 15.
Into the Creole Core: Towards an Aesthetic Apotheosis

In his text ‘Memphis to New Orleans’, dated 14 November 1877, Hearn writes extensively about the faded, dilapidated splendour of the plantations, which he imagines as they used to be in the old slave days. He dwells on the ‘signs of sad ruin on the face of the great plantations, [...] splendid houses crumbling to decay, and whole towns of tenantless cabins; estates of immense extent were lying almost untitled [...] reflection of a glory passed away, the glory of wealth [...] o fair paradise of the South’ (Starr, 2001: 5).

In another ‘arrival scene’ article entitled ‘At the Gate of the Tropics’, dated 19 November 1877, Hearn describes New Orleans as being pre-eminently a port city, evoking the river traffic and the levee atmosphere complete with ‘swarthy stevedores’ (Starr, 2001: 7), these features all recalling his dominant impressions of Cincinnati. Further underlining a sense of continuum between Hearn’s chosen American locations, he mentions specifically too the ‘shapely craft from West Indian harbours’ that grace the New Orleans docklands and notes that the city recalls all ‘seaports in the tropics’ (ibid.). He observes, however, that New Orleans ‘actually resembles no other city upon the face of the earth, yet it recalls vague memories of a hundred cities’ (ibid.). Similarly, he considers that the ‘fascination which New Orleans exercises upon foreigners is due no less to this peculiar characteristic than to the tropical beauty of the city itself’ (ibid.). The city instantly appeals to Hearn, then, because of its tropicality and its faded, dying Southern splendour. But it also appeals because of its transcendence of singularity, its transcendence of its limits. The immense diversity that it suggests renders the city impossible to capture within a single definition, and this diversity stimulates the imagination. ‘If this be not the cosmopolitan city of the world, it is certainly the cosmopolitan city of the Americas’, Hearn writes, explaining that ‘Whensoever the traveller may have come, he may find in the Crescent City some memory of his home – some recollection of his Fatherland – some remembrance of something he loves’ (ibid.). Hearn’s instant approval of New Orleans seems to be based, then, on its embodiment of two key values: displacement and continuum. This ‘port city’ is not just a place of arrival and departure, a site of multiple migration, but also a space of multiple memories, echoes and references, which it has registered in a richly textured, memorial palimpsest.

The analogies between the Louisiana and the Caribbean arrival scenes are quite clear from a comparative reading of Hearn’s account of his inaugural trip to the Caribbean. Thus, when viewed from the bay, under the green shadow of the hills overlooking it, Frederiksted (in Santa Cruz, the first Caribbean island sighted by Hearn) appears to be, like the post-plantation world of Louisiana, both beautiful and in ruins. It
has the appearance of a beautiful Spanish town, with its Romanesque piazzas, churches, many arched buildings peeping through breaks in a line of mahogany, bread-fruit, mango, tamarind, and palm trees, – an irregular mass of at least fifty different tints, from a fiery emerald to a sombre bluish-green. But on entering the streets the illusion of beauty passes: you find yourself in a crumbling, decaying town, with buildings only two stories high. [...] all the buildings look dilapidated; the stucco and paint is falling or peeling everywhere; there are fissures in the walls, crumbling façades, tumbling roofs. (Hearn, 2009: 168)

An implicit reference to slavery, present in the reference to the reconstruction necessitated by a ‘negro revolt in 1878’, highlights the architectural inscription of time and racial interrelation. Similarly, the language spoken in Santa Cruz, although it reminds Hearn of the English of New Orleans while lacking the aesthetic leaven provided in Louisiana by the influence of French, is nonetheless a ‘mixed’ language, ‘a negro-English that sounds like some African tongue’ (Hearn, 2009: 168). This ‘English jargon’ does not appeal to Hearn, however, nor does he find much to recommend in the costumes of the island’s womenfolk, who are ‘very simply, almost savagely garbed’ (ibid.: 169). However, as his trip takes him on to the more ‘French’ or ‘Spanish’ atmospheres of St Kitts, Montserrat, Dominica and Martinique, the resonances of the New Orleans descriptions become much more apparent and the city is indeed referenced in the description of his first impressions of St Pierre:

We are ashore in St. Pierre, the quaintest, queerest, and the prettiest withal, amongst West Indian cities: all stone-built and stone-flagged, with very narrow streets, wooden or zinc awnings, and peaked roofs of red tile, pierced by gabled dormers. [...] The architecture is quite old; it is seventeenth century, probably; and it reminds one a great deal of that characterizing the antiquated French quarter of New Orleans. All the tints, the forms, the vistas, would seem to have been especially selected or designed for aquarelle studies, – just to please the whim of some extravagant artist. (Hearn, 2009: 177)

Hearn proclaims that ‘[p]icturesqueness and color [are] the particular and the unrivalled charms of St. Pierre’ (Hearn 2009, 180). Moreover, in a perhaps not gratuitous description, he identifies the ‘characteristic odor of St. Pierre’ as ‘a compound odor suggesting the intermingling of sugar and garlic in those

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19 The ‘Midsummer Trip to the Tropics’ appears along with many other important texts and letters in Hearn, 2009: 159–246.
strange tropical dishes which creoles love’ (ibid.). As for the population of St Pierre, the town boasts the ‘finest mixed race of the West Indies’, distinguished by ‘dignified carriage and easy elegance of movement’ (ibid.: 181). It is deemed ‘fantastic, astonishing, – a population of the Arabian Nights. [...] many-colored [...] yellow in the interblending of all the hues characterizing mulâtresse, capresse, griffe, quarteronne, métisse, chabine, – a general effect of rich brownish yellow’ (ibid.). Variation and diversity are clearly prized values here, but so too is mixture or ‘interblending’. Like the population of New Orleans, deemed ‘so mixed up that no human being can tell what nation anybody belongs to’ (ibid.: 783), the combinatory richness of the ‘mixed races’ of the Caribbean appeals to Hearn’s intelligence. Furthermore, the supremely blended Martinicans all appear inherently appealing: ‘vigorous, graceful, healthy’ (ibid.: 189), they remind him of bronze sculptures. He notes that ‘all clear tones of bronze [are] represented’ (ibid.: 188) and that the people ‘have the aspect of sculptural models’ (ibid.: 189).

Three themes predominate in Hearn’s encomium to the Creole aesthetic of Martinique. First, the aesthetic sense of a compound, richly various perfection; secondly, the temporal or historical depth to which these combinations and mixtures bear witness; and finally, the ‘sense of an ending’. In relation to this last point, the fact that the Creole aesthetic of Martinique suggests ‘the earliest civilizations’20 underlines the general sense of decline and ruin that predominates in Hearn’s first impressions of the Caribbean (and also, indeed, of New Orleans) and that culminates in his prediction that the mixed races of the Caribbean are doomed to extinction.21

The Temporal Depth of Palimpsest: Hearn’s Creolophilia as Antiquarianism

When Hearn claims that there is ‘much to gratify an artist’s eye in this quaint curious crooked French Quarter’ (Starr, 2001: 7) of New Orleans, he is thinking less of its dilapidation than of its suggestiveness of the past. This suggestiveness is expressed both in terms of its evocation of the Ancient World and in terms of its reference to the recent colonial history of the

20 In Grenada, for example, what struck him most was the ‘dilapidation of her capital and the seeming desolation of its environs’ caused by the ‘decay of the sugar industry’. From ‘Les Blanchisseuses’ in ‘Martinique Sketches’ (Hearn, 2009: 374).

21 At the end of ‘A Midsummer Trip to the Tropics’, he writes: ‘All these mixed races, all these beautiful fruit-coloured populations, seem doomed to extinction: the future tendency must be to universal blackness’ (Hearn, 2009: 246).
New World. The ‘French Quarter’ of the city thus suggests to Hearn ‘many memories of old France’, the France to which the first settlers belonged, even if it also evokes the ruin and decay of the domains of the last ‘Great Planters of the South’ (ibid.: 8). He dwells upon the very faded glory of the city’s ‘Great hotels’, for example the St Charles, with its ‘vast Corinthian columns’, ‘antique lines of beauty’ and ‘noble Greek façades’ (ibid.). For Hearn, the city’s ‘elegant, gracious architecture appears adapted to this sky and this sunny clime’, and he imagines that ‘it was under almost such a sky and such a sun that the Greek architecture was born’ (ibid.). Hearn’s own Mediterranean origins may well be related to his descriptions of the Creole world that reference classical Greece, but one of the clear effects of this reference is to underline the sense of Creole culture as a ‘civilization’ in its own right, a civilization that could stand comparison with Ancient Greece and Rome, and, most crucially of all, as a civilization currently in fin-de-siècle decline.

The ‘antiquarian’ dimension of Hearn’s attraction to the Creole world, including the ‘antiquated dialect of the French Quarter’ (Hearn, 2009: 777) of New Orleans, is primarily illustrated in the Martinican writings by comments on the Creole body as recalling Classical sculptural art and in all Hearn’s Creole writings by his comparison of Creole and Ancient Greek architecture. In a more general sense, however, Creoleness per se is temporal and interrelational depth made visible, and in this sense the broad pan-colonial aesthetic that so fascinates Hearn finds its apotheosis in the Creole world of Martinique. In Louisiana also, however, and even outside the French Creole context altogether, in Ohio, the post-plantation aesthetic demonstrates historical interface by conserving and superimposing audible and visible combinations (for example, the Irish-accented dialect of the Ohio ex-slaves).

The greater the intrinsic aesthetic grace of the elements combined and conserved in postcolonial compounds, the greater the number of different combinations and the greater the extent of the combination or mixture, the more intellectual and aesthetic pleasure Hearn declares. This equation explains the particular charm for him of historical superimpositions of different colonial presences, such as the successive combinations allowed by the replacement of the Spanish colonial presence by the French settlement in New Orleans. Hearn’s comments on the architecture of New Orleans make the appeal of such colonial palimpsest very clear. Thus, ‘The City of the South’ mentions ‘The old Spanish cathedral’ and notes that Hearn was initially ‘terribly disappointed about it’ (Starr, 2001: 13). After having crumbled, ‘it was reconstructed Frenchily, and has lost its Spanish features’ (ibid.). He notes, however, that ‘You may still find those features preserved in certain old prints that hang, yellow with age and spotted with fly-specks,
in the offices of certain ancient Notaries of the French Quarter; and you will
find that Don André built the cathedral after that curiously mixed, but not
unimposing style that characterizes the old cathedrals of Spanish-America'
and that it had, for example, ‘towers with Roman-arched windows’ (ibid.). He
goes on to note that tombs in the French Cathedral include that of

the noble French family De Marigny de Mandeville, ante-revolutionary,
aristocrats all, who may have strutted in those picturesque costumes we
are familiar with in the paintings of the period; who belonged in the age
in which gentlemen bowed and took snuff with an ineffable grace which this
uncultivated generation are powerless to conceive of. (Starr, 2001: 14)

Hearn’s admiration of the manners and style of the French Ancien Régime
could not be clearer. His fascination with the architecture of New Orleans
is thus based on the historical patina that registers (successively or simulta-
neously) both Spanish and French features, and on its conservation (in aspic,
as it were) of the shared ‘Old World’ style of these features. ‘New Orleans’, he
writes in a piece entitled ‘The Streets’, ‘alone of American cities, has preserved
all the romance of its earlier days in the titles of its streets, and with a
simple directory one can recall the entire history of the French and Spanish
dominion’ (Starr, 2001: 18). Similarly, the palimpsest of the Creole patois as
spoken in the Caribbean preserves the ‘entire history’ of the mutations and
exchanges of the old colonial world. In his ‘Midsummer Trip to the Tropics’,
he writes that

Now, in almost every island the negro idiom is different. So often have
some of the Antilles changed owners, moreover, that in them the negro
has never been able to form a true patois. He had scarcely acquired some
idea of the language of his first masters, when other rulers and another
tongue were thrust upon him, – and this may have occurred three or four
times! (Hearn, 2009: 239)

Conclusion

The extent to which all of Hearn’s work, including his Japanese writings, was
underwritten by his fascination with Creole palimpsest is not a matter that
can be explored in this study. The various factors that have been suggested
here as explaining and sustaining that fascination (Hearn’s own culturally
diverse origins, his experience of cultural displacement and interrelation
and his consequential interest in cultural transcription and translation) may
indeed have found another outlet in his Japan writings. Certainly, almost
every line of his American writings, stretching over twenty years, testifies
American Creoles

to his fixation on the Creole continuum of ethnic, cultural and linguistic palimpsest which links the two post-plantation worlds of Louisiana and the Caribbean, a continuum that spills over, however, not just into the Anglophone and Hispanophone post-colonies of the Caribbean, but also into Cincinatti’s mixed urban ghettos where Hearn first encountered it. Thus, when claiming for Hearn the status of honorary ‘Creoleness’ on the basis of his adoption of ‘multiple identity’, the founders of the ‘Créolité’ movement are saluting his espousal of a ‘diversalité’ which is less a function of the particular diverse elements brought into relation with each other in the Creole crucible than of the universal dynamic and aesthetic of contact and interaction produced by all cultural dislocation and relocation.

Works Cited


Lafcadio Hearn’s American Writings and the Creole Continuum


