

THE POWER OF COMPARISON IN THE CARIBBEAN: CREOLIZATION AND TRANSCULTURATION IN PERSPECTIVE

*O poder da comparação no Caribe: criouliização
e transculturação em perspectiva*

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ABSTRACT

The Antilles have been described as a bridge between the Global North and South. However, the global study of the Caribbean societies has often been hindered by the very elements used to describe them. Thus, in response, several concepts have been proposed from anthropology, linguistics, and literature to make sense of Caribbean societies' experiences as a result of the colonial encounter. This study compares two "bridge-concepts," creolization and transculturation, based on the works of Fernando Ortiz, Édouard Glissant, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant. Consequently, it sheds light on the concepts' definitions, and how they address the aspects of temporality, cultural interactions, particularization versus generalization, and the violence of the colonial encounter. By clarifying these concepts and terms like acculturation, Americanization, and *Antillanité*, the article makes a significant contribution to literary studies as it contextualizes the explanatory potential and limitations of these critical terms for understanding complex phenomena that unfolded in the Caribbean.

KEYWORDS: Creolization; transculturation; Caribbean studies; Afro-Latin American studies; temporality; colonial violence.

RESUMO

As Antilhas têm sido descritas como uma ponte entre o Norte e o Sul globais. No entanto, o estudo global das sociedades caribenhas, muitas vezes, tem sido dificultado pelos próprios elementos utilizados para descrevê-las. Assim, em resposta, vários conceitos têm sido propostos nas disciplinas de antropologia, linguística e literatura para dar sentido às experiências das sociedades caribenhas como resultado do encontro colonial. Este estudo compara dois "conceitos-ponte", criouliização e transculturação, com base nas obras de Fernando Ortiz, Édouard Glissant, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau e Raphael Confiant. Conseqüentemente, ele lança luz sobre as definições desses conceitos e sobre as formas como os pensadores mencionados abordam os aspectos da temporalidade, interações culturais, particularização versus generalização e a violência do encontro colonial. O estudo também inclui uma discussão de conceitos relacionados, como aculturação, americanização e *Antillanité*. Finalmente, ele traz uma contribuição significativa para os estudos literários porque, ao conferir clareza a esses conceitos, contextualiza seu potencial explicativo, e as limitações na compreensão de fenômenos complexos que se desenrolaram na região do Caribe.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: criouliização; transculturação; estudos caribenhos; estudos afro-latino-americanos; temporalidade; violência colonial.

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*La mer des Antilles n'est pas le lac des États-Unis.
C'est l'estuaire des Amériques.*
[The Sea of the Antilles is not an American lake.
It is the estuary of the Americas; translated by the author]
Édouard Glissant (1997a, p. 427)

For Antonio Benítez-Rojo, whom I was late to meet.

In this study, I examine the possibility of bridging literary, anthropological, and linguistic boundaries between the Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean by systematically comparing two concepts, *creolization* and *transculturation*, which have been used in the borders of these disciplinary fields. As Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1992, p.1) points out, the main obstacles hindering a global study of Caribbean societies are the very elements used to define the area: “its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity, its contingency and impermanence, its syncretism.” Considering Benítez-Rojo’s definition of the Antilles, and repositioning it within recent debates about the Global North and South, I propose creolization and transculturation as “bridge-concepts” to understand the historical transformation of Caribbean societies over the centuries and to remind readers of the complexities revolving around the Caribbean. The goal is to bridge the “Caribbean machine, whose flux, whose noise, whose presence covers the map of world history’s contingencies, through the great changes in economic discourse to the vast collisions of races and cultures that humankind has seen” (Benítez-Rojo, 1992, p. 5). Specifically, this study provides a conceptual comparison between creolization and transculturation, supplemented with discussions of *Antillanité* and Americanization.

The Global South has recently emerged as a framework for literary and cultural studies, particularly within comparative literature (Armillas-Tiseyra *et al*, 2021; West-Pavlov, 2018). The term “Global South” was first used by social scientists to discuss economic expansion. Afterwards, literary and cultural studies scholars pushed its growth to become an interdisciplinary field. A similar interdisciplinary development has occurred with the concepts of creolization and transculturation over the twentieth century. Such growth was particularly noticeable in the context of Area studies in the United States, with discussions of national languages and literatures in Latin America being led by scholars who started using these concepts as frameworks within social sciences and literary and cultural studies of the region. These concepts’ formal contradictions were discussed in critical interventions by Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1949), Ángel Rama (1982), Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1992), Antonio Cornejo Polar (1994), and Arcadio Díaz-Quinones (2006), among many other critics. Nevertheless, the comparative reading of these concepts within Caribbean studies has been limited.

I contend that a comparison of these two concepts is valuable for deepening the understanding of Caribbean societies. But such a comparison should focus on placing these societies into a position of mutual revelation of one another rather than merely continuing the debates over these concepts’ definitions or delimitations. Just as literary and cultural scholars have been critical about the development

of Global South studies, literary and cultural critics should pursue a comparative analysis of the Caribbean across linguistic barriers. Doing so would allow Caribbeanists to respond to a series of larger “global” and “transnational” turns that have reshaped the literary field in the last decades. These transnational turns initially referred to the process of neoliberal globalization in Latin America, which gained political and cultural significance within U.S. academia, and was influenced by Latin American states’ struggles in search of alternative forms of social organization and political alliances. The search of alternative forms of social organization has been arduously debated, as Román de la Campa’s (2017) book questions whether there is still potential in the residues of the nation after being dominated by the state. Nevertheless, two recent articulations of these transnational turns are found in the growing fields of Afro-Latin American studies and Afro-Latinx studies in the United States. The former examines African descendants in Brazil, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and nearly two dozen other countries; the latter shifts away from Area studies in the United States and focuses on Latinos with full or partial African ancestry in the U.S. Both fields have been repositioning the Caribbean within larger discussions of critical race studies and diasporic relations within U.S. academia and beyond specific national contexts, by placing the issue of race as a marker of difference. The publication of *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction* (2020), a collection of essays edited by Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews, marked a new phase for this field. An ongoing series on Afro-Latin American studies by Cambridge University Press has followed this publication. Conversely, Black diasporic, Caribbeanist, and literary and cultural studies scholars are compiling works that connect Afro-Latinx and Caribbean writers and cultural producers, for example, Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez (2020), Israel Reyes (2022), and Rebeca Hey-Colón (2023). Nevertheless, Caribbean studies still constitutes a subfield of Latin American studies within U.S. academia. The field of Afro-Latin American studies has been significant for Caribbean studies, since comparative analysis of the Caribbean and other Latin American regions reveals a greater centrality of the experience of Atlantic slavery in Caribbean literature. I contend that it is time that Caribbeanists intervene in these discussions by reigniting the conversation about concepts such as creolization and transculturation. These are powerful concepts that account for the heterogeneous, fragmented, and yet, interconnected Caribbean. I argue that examining these concepts would allow scholars to approach the commonality of the African diasporic experience, without neglecting regional differences. Furthermore, these concepts were conceptualized within particular historical and political contexts and although their thinkers offer regional interpretations, they did not ignore such differences. For example, the legacy of the colonial experience lived today in Haiti, where the first Black Revolution took place, cannot be homogenized with the complex geopolitical situation of Puerto Rico in relation to the United States, nor with the experience of Cuba during the wars for independence and the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Contemporary debates on creolization and transculturation still call for a careful comparison of the political and social processes experienced by each of these nations.

Critics, such as Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Marisa Belausteguigoitia (2016), caution scholars who work with cultural and critical concepts that originate in Caribbean thought. They alert on the *untranslatability* of such concepts, once appropriated by and placed within U.S. academia: “This critical risk operates at many levels—states the authors—social, cultural, political, and pedagogical, to name a few—in which theory from elsewhere arrives at a new site (as a new

sight) and is used to explain other works and events” (1). Latin America (including Brazil) has a long history of debates on the problems of cultural appropriation (Schwarz, 1992). Thus, this advice for caution also serves as a point of departure in this study. What happens when terms like creolization and transculturation are taken beyond their local or national context, and placed into the regional, North American, or Brazilian academic worlds? I think that literary critics must perform a reading that both engages with the concepts’ local inflections—that is, their different origins and genealogies within the Caribbean—but also registers the changes that occur when applying these concepts elsewhere, rather than imposing other theoretical problems or cultural traditions in the new context. Yet, this presents another theoretical dilemma: how does one *register* the different changes a concept undergoes after it is resituated? Here, taking a comparative approach helps, as it allows scholars to better understand a concept’s trajectory—by marking its origin, movements, changes, and the singularities of its arriving point.

The concepts of creolization and transculturation originate from people’s experiences in two distinct regions, the French and Spanish Caribbean, and these concepts do not usually converge in literary studies. Nonetheless, literature itself notably does not retain this division, as exemplified in novels such as Alejo Carpentier’s *The kingdom of this world* (1970),¹ and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s *Sea of lentils* (1985), originally published in Spanish as *El mar de las lentejas* (1979). Interestingly, Benítez-Rojo (1985) ingeniously named the Caribbean sea in his novel as *las lentejas* [the lentils], referring to the Spanish translation of the French *les lentilles*, which has a similar pronunciation as the phrase *Les Antilles* [The Antilles], also from the French. From a Haitian viewpoint, in his memoir *Le métier à métisser* (1998), René Depestre dedicates long passages to reflecting on his exile in Cuba. Jacques Roumain makes Manuel, the protagonist of *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1946), come from Cuba after having had experiences with the labor movement there. Several works speak of the 1937 massacre on the Haitian-Dominican border and depict the “Dominican” side, such as Edwidge Danticat’s *The farming of bones* (1998) and *Le peuple des terres mêlées* (1989) by René Philoctète. In the Dominican Republic, readers can find Juan Bosch’s short stories, on the racial prejudice against Haitians, and especially against one of his most memorable characters: the tragic and yet illuminated “Luis Pie” (1940).² But, perhaps, the text that best addresses the subject of Cuba from a Caribbean perspective does not come from the Francophone Caribbean, but was written by a West Indian, the Jamaican-Panamanian Andrew Salkey, who was in exile in London, and who attended the Cultural Congress of Havana of 1968 and made a newspaper that he published three years later, in 1971: *Havana Journal*.³ Yet, despite originating in the Caribbean and sharing important points of convergence, most of these literary works have picked up steam separately within the North American academy. They are studied within two distinct traditions: Francophone studies and Latin American studies. Likewise, the concepts of creolization and transculturation do not converge in the actual scholarship or criticism. They are examined separately. In this sense, this study adds to the work of critics who have connected these terms and territories.

1 The novel was published in 1949 in Spanish and first translated into English in 1957.

2 “Luis Pie” (1940) was originally published in the Cuban magazine *Carteles* (January 14, 1940, p. 17-18).

3 I thank Camila Valdés León for referring me to Salkey’s work.

One example of such scholarship is the aforementioned book edited by Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Marisa Belausteguigoitia, *Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought* (2016). Another example is the edited volume, *Racialized Visions: Haiti and the Hispanic Caribbean* (2020), in which Vanessa K. Valdés grapples with the question of how the understanding of the Hispanic Caribbean would change if Haiti was placed as part of the center? Cultural critic Sibylle Fischer (2004) and historian Ada Ferrer (2014) have posed similar questions in the last two decades. Although they do not directly compare creolization and transculturation, they examine the Spanish and French Caribbean in relation to one another by placing questions of slavery and racialization at the heart of the political history and thought of these regions. Fischer (2004) wants to confront the pernicious idea that the Haitian Revolution was barbarian and responsible for violence outside the sphere of civilization. Instead, she argues for Haiti's participation in Western modernity (p. 4). Ferrer (2014) argues that the connections between Cuba and Haiti existed beyond the known claim that Cuban planters resisted independence from Spain so adamantly because of their terror of the perspective of "another Haiti."

However, no systematic study has methodologically compared these two concepts with the same level of depth. In their recent work, "Creolization as Method", Parvulescu and Boatcă (2023) follow Glissant's approach to argue that creolization condenses both the sedimentation and ramification of Caribbean history better than transculturation, but they do not analyze the concept of transculturation to support this claim. In *Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*, Paul Gilroy describes his own fascination with the processes of cultural mutation and restless discontinuity that exceed the racial discourse and "considers the theorization of creolization, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity the most important aspect" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 2). Although the book unfolds strong arguments about the dynamic tradition of the Black culture throughout the Atlantic, it does not clarify the differences and relationships among the previous concepts. With such generalizations, the political potential of these concepts is diminished. Therefore, furthering the notion of the Caribbean as a bridge between the Global North and South, I follow Glissant's definition of *insularité* as an estuary: "Dans la Caraïbe pourtant, chaque île est une ouverture" [In the Caribbean, however, each island is an opening; translated by the author] (1997a, p. 427).

The first section of this article presents the existing ideas regarding transculturation and creolization from various fields. For the discussion of transculturation, the central text considered is Fernando Ortiz's masterpiece *Cuban counterpoint: tobacco and sugar*, published in Spanish in 1940, and in English in 1947. No single and hegemonic text about creolization exists, but some authors' works do provide an "Antillean Critical Theory" that "cry out in insubordination and aversion to the state of their world, and seek to articulate the promise that another world is possible" (Nesbitt, 2013, p. XI). Therefore, this analysis examines the perspectives of Glissant (1997a), who wrote *Le discours Antillais*, and Patrick, Jean and Raphael's (1993) *Eloge de la Créolité*.

DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPTS

In the appendix to the *Cuban counterpoint: sugar and tobacco*, titled "On the social phenomenon of 'Transculturation' and its importance in Cuba," Fernando Ortiz defines transculturation as a way of making sense of the following anthropological debate:

I am of the opinion that the word “transculturation” better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word “acculturation” really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition, it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called “neoculturation.” (Ortiz, 1947, p. 103).

While the integration of indigenous groups or immigrants into the American societies was previously commonly explained as a unidirectional movement toward a new cultural acquisition, Ortiz (1947) brings attention to another aspect: what is lost in that process? Thus, based on the functionalist theory, he called attention to the new sociological formation of cultural encounters that involves a historical balance in movement. Ortiz’s (1947) understanding of culture straddles the boundaries of the biological and social dimensions.

First, the biological aspect follows the example of the pioneer anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, for whom “the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them” (Ortiz, 1947, p. 103). Second, transculturation implies some degree of social determinism because it is only through this approach that the “evolution of the Cuban folk” can be comprehended, “either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of its life” (Ortiz, 1947, p. 98).⁴ The multiple forms of determinism that are present in this concept suggests another important text pertaining to anthropological theory, the *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, written in 1923–1934 by Marcel Mauss. One of its principal ideas is about cultural dimensions as “fait social total,” which means, facts “qu’ils mettent en branle dans certains cas la totalité de la société et des institutions et, dans d’autres cas, seulement un très grand nombre d’institutions” [that set in motion in some cases the whole of society and institutions and, in other cases, only a very large number of institutions; translated by the author] (Mauss, 2002, p. 102).

Both Ortiz (1947) and Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant (1993) apply a comparative approach. Just as Ortiz contrasts transculturation with acculturation in the appendix of his essay, in *Eloge de la Créolité*, Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant contrast the creolization or creolness with *Antillanité* and *Americanité*. These comparisons define their focal concepts while explaining their “genealogies” or “affiliations.” However, the comparison becomes more restrictive in the case of transculturation because Ortiz (1947) discusses only the concept of acculturation in the Cuban context. In the case of creolization, it becomes more expansive because of the differences elicited by the concepts of Americanization or Americanness and *Antillanité* (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993). For Chamoiseau Bernabé, and Confiant (1993), “Creolness is the interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history” (p. 87), whereas *Antillanité* is a sort of previous step to creolization, thus simplifying Glissant’s (1997a) argument that: “*Antillanité* designates, in our eyes, the only process of Americanization of Europeans, Africans and Asians through the Antilles Archipelago” (p. 32). Simultaneously, they differentiate

⁴ For a discussion on nationalism and transculturation in Fernando Ortiz, see Rafael Rojas’s “Against homo cubensis: transculturation and nationalism in the work of Fernando Ortiz” (2004).

creolization from *Americanité* because “Americanization, and therefore the feeling of Americanness that ultimately results from it, describes the gradual adaptation of populations of the Western world to the natural realities of the world they baptized new” (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 91). Thus, creolization involves a dual process: “the adaptation of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to the New World; and the cultural confrontation of these peoples within the same space, resulting in a mixed culture called creole” (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 93). Yet, despite these authors’ simplification of Glissant’s argument about *Antillanité* as a previous step to creolization, their previous claims echo Glissant’s own reasoning, as demonstrated in the following quote from *Poétique de la relation*:

Si nous parlons de cultures métissées (comme l’antillaise par exemple), ce n’est pas pour définir une catégorie en-soi qui s’opposerait par là à d’autres catégories (de cultures ‘pures’), mais pour affirmer qu’aujourd’hui s’ouvre pour la mentalité humaine une approche infinie de la Relation, comme conscience et comme projet.⁵ (Glissant, 1990, 1997b, p. 428).

In short, transculturation and creolization are similar in that they define a new anthropological and sociological humanity, in terms of their process of transformation and the instability of all previous cultural identities. However, the differences between these concepts must be understood to delineate their limitations. It is also important to establish their relationships and evaluate how the aspect of “openness” functions in them. Meanwhile, the definitions of creolization and transculturation have experienced interdisciplinary growth since their origins, as scholars sought to bridge the fields of literature and anthropology. Furthermore, both concepts are defined by a rhetorical strategy opposed to other concepts, such as acculturation and *Americanité*. Additionally, *Antillanité* has particular resonances with *Créolité*, although Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant (1993) try to deny it.

CRITICISMS OF EACH CONCEPT

Transculturation and creolization are two concepts periodically invoked to explain various phenomena in the Caribbean and beyond. Benítez-Rojo’s (1992) article, “Fernando Ortiz: the Caribbean and postmodernity,” discusses transculturation’s usage in literary studies. In this article, Benítez-Rojo attributes many postmodern features to the essays written in the 1940 and refers to transculturation as a concept that “alludes to Cuba’s super syncretic archive, especially in everything that touches on Afro-European syncretism” (Benítez-Rojo, 1992, p. 155). He also argues that Ortiz’s description of the dynamics of the Caribbean and his analytical framework led to a reading “that has an outcome different from any that might have been done from the perspectives either of modernity or of postmodernity” (Benítez-Rojo, 1992, p. 157).

The high contemporary interest in creolization is exemplified by books such as *The Creolization of theory* (Lionnet and Shih, 2011) and *Creolization: history, ethnography, theory* (Stewart, 2007). Lionnet and Shih (2011, p. 21) propose a “theory of the minor” to arrive at a new analysis that “will be brought to the foreground to creolize the universalisms we live with today, doing so from the bottom up and from the inside out”. Stewart (2007, p. 3) emphasizes how creolization is fertile yet confusing,

⁵ If we speak of mixed cultures (like the Antilles for example), it is not to define a category in itself, which would thereby oppose other categories (of “pure” cultures), but to affirm that today opens up for the human mentality an infinite approach to the Relation, as consciousness and as a project (translated by the author).

because of its diverse genealogy: “Those who approach it [from a particular disciplinary field], or with the normative meaning from a particular historical period in mind, are in for some surprises should they encounter it outside their own familiar territory.” The edited volume presents a collective effort to historicize the term so as to “understand this diversity, while also providing clues as to how these various strands of meaning may historically relate to one another” (Stewart, 2007, p. 3).

While there is no single and hegemonic text on creolization, this is not the case for transculturation. Fernando Ortiz was a well-known Cuban anthropologist in the 1940s, when *Cuban counterpoint: tobacco and sugar* was first published. This work contains one main essay and 25 additional chapters, one of which explains the concept of transculturation. Cuba’s nationalistic environment and an anthropological controversy regarding the concept of *acculturation* serve as important contexts for this book. Since the nineteenth century, Cuba had fought for its independence from Spain, but independence was agreed upon only at the end of the nineteenth century by Spain and the United States, which assumed control over the island with two full military interventions, and appointed two U.S. governors in 1898 and 1906. During the 1940s, a discussion on the *Cubanidad* took place, aimed at defining the Cuban people. The concept of transculturation was part of an attempt to refine this definition and was developed as part of an anthropological critique of the concept of acculturation that was commonly used to describe colonial encounters in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Latin American anthropologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Ortiz, interpreted their own nations rather than focusing on distant cultures and societies. Being in places such as Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, allowed them to shift from the position of “objects” of study to the position of knowledge “producers.” Thus, they played a key role in articulating national(ist) imaginaries and produced what Claudio Lomnitz (2001, p. 228) called “national anthropologies.” Two iconic examples are the cases of Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987) in Brazil and Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) in Cuba, the founders of modern sociocultural anthropology in those countries.⁶

Regarding creolization, in his work, *Des îles, des hommes, des langues: Essai sur la créolisation linguistique et culturelle*, French linguist Chaudenson (1992) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between geographically specific uses of the terms *Creole* and creolization while also underlining their commonalities. From the beginning, Creole was used to describe children born to European settlers in the New World and Indian Ocean’s island colonies. The colonial context provides a common ground for the usage of the term Creole, as it was derived from the Spanish *Criollo* and the Portuguese *Crioulo*, when both these empires dominated the New-World region for more than three centuries. By the eighteenth century, the French word *Créole* was used specifically to refer to Black, White, and Mulatto people born in the Caribbean, Louisiana, Mauritius, Réunion, and Haiti. In contemporary Mauritius, this term is used to refer primarily to non-White people, whereas in Réunion and in the Antilles, it still refers to Black, White, and Mulatto people.⁷ Per Lionnet and Shih’s (2011) criticism of Chaudenson, “this instability is a function of historically specific dynamics that militate against any easy universalization of the concept” (p. 22). These dynamics include ethnic differences and the presence

6 In this regard, I recommend Jossianna Arroyo-Martínez’s (2003) work, which compares these two authors.

7 To understand the semantic changes of the term Creole within French-, Spanish- and English-speaking Caribbean, I recommend Jose Antonio Mazzotti’s (2016) “Criollismo, Creole, and Créolité,” in *Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought Historical and Institutional Trajectories*, and Yolanda Martínez San-Miguel’s (2009) “Poéticas caribeñas de lo criollo: creole/ criollo/ créolité.”

of many language systems. Regarding creolization, in the introduction of *The creolization of theory*, Lionnet and Shih (2011) point out the features of the “indigenization” or “nativization” processes resulting from the historical contact between the European settlers and people in the New World, claiming that “[i]t underscores racial and cultural mixing due to colonization, slavery, and migration” (Lionnet, 2011, p. 22). They also acknowledged that the term creolization had been appropriated by a wide spectrum of ideological ends and linguistic categories that emphasize social and ethnic cleavages or promote forms of “ecumenicity” to transcend the exact same cleavages. Furthermore, following Édouard Glissant’s distinction between creoleness—as a state that reified elements of multilingualism and multiethnicity—and creolization, as “an open-ended process that can be happening in different parts of the world” (Lionnet and Shih, 2011, p. 24), they consider going one step further and elaborating a new theoretical approach using the idea of creolization.

After Chaudenson (1992) published his linguistic and cultural essay, Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphael Confiant (1993) released a manifesto called *Eloge de la créolité*. In it, they presented a sort of Antillean “genealogy,” starting with a background on *doudouisme*⁸ and going up to the present. This text seems to present a historical evolution, focusing on Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant and their ideas of *negritude* and *Antillanité*, respectively. In fact, the text is written not only in honor of Glissant and Césaire, but also as a clear attempt to overcome ideas inherited from them and to legitimize the “creolité movement” based on their personal testimonies. As they state, such a testimony is based on a “sterile experience which we have known before committing ourselves to reactivate our creative potential, and to set in motion the expression of what we are” (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 75). Presenting a genealogy of the “French Caribbean Critique” and considering itself an aesthetic and political successor, the manifesto *Eloge de la Créolité* is a valuable guide for a comparison with Glissant’s ideas, which were developed in the previous decade.

In terms of the disciplinary context, transculturation worked in anthropology at first as an “ethnographic authority”⁹ to define the Cubanidad. Later, the concept was appropriated in literary and cultural studies, for instance, by Ángel Rama (1982) and Mary Louise Pratt (1992), who have produced edificant and contestatory readings, respectively. Another reflection is Silvia Spitta’s (1995) theory of the “transcultured subject,” which claims the Andean heterogeneity by departing from José María Argueda’s work. Carlos Jáuregui (2015) has linked Anthropophagy to transculturation. Most recently, a new wave of criticism has taken up transculturation to think about Latin American literature in the context of a “new materialism” that follows object-oriented ontologies, such as Héctor Hoyos’s *Things with a History* (2019). Despite the use of Creole as a social category in the Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonial worlds, the literary and linguistic fields seem to have been the best “laboratories” for developing the concept of creolization, as demonstrated by the manifesto *Eloge de la créolisation*

8 *Doudouisme* is the valorization of the African culture in the French-speaking Caribbean, but through the exoticization of the doudou in particular and of Haitian women in general. In a sense, it is a concept parallel to *Negrismo* in Cuba. Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant (1991), in their study *Creole Letters*, describe the literary field of doudouisme that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century as a French Antillean cultural archetype: “This literature uses Creole reality, thus returning to some extent to the [Antillean] world of one’s existence, but one returns to it as a tourist, that is to say with a European vision, an exotic and therefore superficial vision. And this superficial gaze upon oneself and one’s own world only retains the paradisiacal, the blues of the sky, the white of the sand, the flowers and little birds, and above all what the traveler appreciates more than anything: the doudou, a bewitching creature who searches out the means of improving her bad luck by charming passersby” (89).

9 For a discussion about ethnographic authority, see Clifford’s (1983) “On ethnographic authority.”

and the “French Caribbean Critique” tradition. This disciplinary context must be considered when thinking about collective identities in the Caribbean, such as the political aims of these projects.

Thus, in Cuba, the concept of transculturation successfully helped to imagine the cultural integration of a new people into a new nation. Notwithstanding, in Haiti, Martinique, Guadalupe, and Guiana, no concept, including *doudouisme*, *negritude*, *Antillanité*, and now creolization, reached the same level of legitimacy during the period of the colonial struggles. The next section discusses and compares some explanations of these concepts.

BRIDGING THE TRANSCULTURATION AND CREOLIZATION PERSPECTIVES

To compare the concepts of transculturation and creolization, I summarize the driving questions raised to approach the key dimensions of both ideas. These questions pertain to how the concepts deal with temporality, the idea of mixture, balance and tensions between particularity and generalization, and the colonial encounter.

Role of temporality

Temporality is an important dimension of both concepts, as they are typically analyzed using the diachronic perspective, that is, by considering the last four centuries of interactions between people originally from the “New World” and overseas. According to Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant:

[For] three centuries the islands and parts of continents affected by this phenomenon proved to be real forges of a new humanity, where languages, races, religions, customs, ways of being from all over the world were brutally uprooted and transplanted in an environment where they had to reinvent life. (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 88).

Fernando Ortiz probably would agree with the idea of the “New World” as a forger of a new humanity, saying that

Among all people historical evolution has always meant a vital change from one culture to another at times varying from gradual to sudden. But in Cuba, the cultures that have influenced the formation of its folk have been so many and so diverse in their spatial position and their structural composition that this vast blend of races and cultures overshadows in importance every other historical phenomenon. (Ortiz, 1947, p. 99).

Again, despite the importance of a long diachrony for the development of transculturation and creolization, Ortiz’s (1997) thoughts indicate an evolutionary pathway and a high intensity required to cross it. This condition of *evolution* and *speed* is clearly exposed in the neologism *años-cultura* (culture-years), a metaphoric measure for thinking about cultural evolution, as Ortiz (1947, p. 99) states that “[t]he whole gamut of culture run by Europe in a span of more than four millenniums took place in Cuba in less than four centuries. In Europe, the change was step-by-step; here it was by leaps and bounds.”

In my view, evolution and progress are keywords in the temporal definition of the transculturation process, in contrast with creolness’s definition as “the world diffracted but recomposed, a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier” (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 88). The creolness’s diffracted

world suggests a sort of bricolage or juxtaposition that is not determined by history, but principally by the “transactional aggregates” of people in different places.

By juxtaposing this position with Glissant’s (1997a) consideration of the Martinique people and their collective memory, it is possible to find resonances with Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant’s (1993) perspective:

Beaucoup d’entre nous n’ont jamais fréquenté leur temps historique; nous l’avons seulement éprouvé... Notre quête de la dimension temporelle ne sera donc ni harmonieuse ni linéaire. Elle cheminera dans un polyphonie de chocs dramatiques... L’harmonie majestueuse ne prévaut pas ici, mais la recherche inquiète et souvent chaotique.¹⁰ (Glissant, 1997a, p. 344).

Glissant’s (1997a) and Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant’s (1993) thoughts converge as both go against a potential evolutionary perspective. Contrastingly, Ortiz (1947) emphasizes an evolutionary perspective in the concept of transculturation. Yet, Ortiz’s evolutionary perspective may be contested if we consider the metaphor of the *ajiaco*.¹¹ Although Ortiz (1947) denies the *ajiaco* the theoretical charge he gave to transculturation – perhaps Ortiz thought that a sociological concept would provide a better fit for generalizations than a culinary metaphor –, anthropologist Stephan Palmié (2013) shows its theoretical value far beyond the nationalist reach:

Once we choose the *ajiaco* as a metaphor circumscribing our perspective, the world of clearcut units is lost to us. Inside the olla cubana [Cuban pot] Africa, America and Europe can no longer be disentangled. There are, at best, unstable gradations by which one mutates into the other, and this process of refraction, decomposition, and its corresponding movement of recomposition and autopoiesis generates a potentially infinite series of possible perceptions of difference. What we face is nothing short of a meltdown of the pluralistic epistemic infrastructure guaranteeing a good deal of the anthropological project, as traditionally conceived. The ethnographic interface has expanded into a total, and thoroughly totalizing, social phenomenon, with little, if anything, clearly discernible on either side. The *ajiaco*, in other words, circumscribes a fractal pattern. History cooks us all. (Palmié, 2013, p. 101).

Palmié (2013) clarifies that Ortiz’s (1947) *ajiaco* can, not only help us understand Cuba and the Afro-descendant population, but also lead us from anthropology’s old focus of understanding cultural entities through the ideas of essentialism and evolution.

The idea of mixture

Describing the human and non-human elements (and their respective roles) present in various interactions is essential to “forge” a new humanity. This process also brings one’s attention to other concepts’ commonalities and differences. Ortiz (1947) suggests that transculturation began with interactions with the Ciboney and Guanahatabey until the conquest by the Taino, and before the arrival of Europeans. Since the first contact with Europeans, an enormous influx of people has come to Cuba, bringing about cultural and economic transformations.

¹⁰ Many of us have never frequented their historical time; we have only experienced it... Our quest for the temporal dimension will therefore be neither harmonious nor linear. It will travel in a polyphony of dramatic shocks... Majestic harmony does not prevail here, but restless and often chaotic research (translated by the author).

¹¹ For an analysis of the *ajiaco* metaphor in Cuba’s nationalist imaginary and beyond, I recommend João Felipe Gonçalves’s (2014) “The *Ajiaco* in Cuba and beyond: Preface to ‘The Human Factors of Cubanidad’ by Fernando Ortiz.”

In Cuba, the terms Ciboney, Taino, Spaniard, Jew, English, French, Anglo-American, Negro, Yucatec, Chinese, and Creole do not mean merely the different elements that go into the make-up of the Cuban nation (...). Each of these has come to mean an addition to the synthetic and historic appellation of one of the various economies and cultures that existed in Cuba successively and even simultaneously, at times giving rise to the most terrible clashes. (Ortiz, 1947, p. 99).

Although Ortiz listed various groups, their contributions to the transcultural experience are not symmetrical, as the contribution is determined by its connection with the economy, understood as material culture and institutions. Expanding on this argument, in the *Cuban counterpoint: tobacco and sugar*, he uses these two elements to explain not only the driving forces of the colonial and contemporary Cuban economy, but also many different institutions, habits, behaviors, and so on. For instance, a combination of culture and economy explains the disappearance of the Taino people, and the heterogeneity of the White and Black populations. Regarding the presence of the Europeans, he states:

Some of the white men brought with them a feudal economy, conquerors in search of loot and peoples to subjugate and make serfs of; while others, White too, were urged on by mercantile and even industrial capitalism, which was already in its early stages of development. (Ortiz, 1947, p. 100)

In the case of Africans arriving in Cuba, despite the variety of people described, the author assures that “[t]he Negroes brought with their bodies their souls, but not their institutions nor their implements... No other human element has had to suffer such a profound and repeated change of surroundings, cultures, class, and conscience” (Ortiz, 1947, p. 101).

The economy and culture played a similar role in explaining the elements of creolness or *creolité*. However, as Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant (1993) argue, contrary to the “splendid isolation” of migrant cultures in Americanization, creolité balances various elements, many of which are situated outside the American continent:

These designs are the result of a nonharmonious (and unfinished therefore nonreductionist) mix of linguistic, religious, cultural, culinary, architectural, medical, etc. practices of different people in question... There are Caribbean Creolness, a Guyanese Creolness, a Brazilian Creolness, an African Creolness, an Asian Creolness and a Polynesian Creolness. (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 92).

Another important point is the possibility of defining the creolness process inside and outside national boundaries. In this case, unlike Ortiz’s (1947) conceptualization of transculturation within the context of the Cuban national identity, Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant (1993) define the creolness process similarly as Glissant’s definition of the Antilles: a space of “multi-relations. Nous le ressentons tous, nous l’exprimons sous toutes sortes de formes occultées ou caricaturales” [multi-relations. We all feel it, we express it in all sorts of hidden or caricatural forms; translated by the author]. (Glissant, 1997a, p. 427).

In short, transculturation and creolization seem to share more commonalities in the dimension of mixture than in other dimensions.

Particularization and generalization

The wide scope of creolness, going beyond the American continent to configure patterns of non-harmonious and non-reductionist mixed relations, allows us to discuss how the balance between particularity and generalization works in *Eloge de la Créolité* (1993). Initially, the authors criticize the idea of *Antillanité* as restricted and territorialized, claiming that creolness is “the cement of our culture and that it ought to rule the foundations of our Caribbeanness” (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 87). This implies a need to discuss the political and local uses of creolness in the Caribbean context. As the authors mention: “Caribbeanness is first of all, a geopolitical concept” (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 87). However, there are many different patterns of creolness outside the American continent, which are just as important as the “Caribbean creolness:” “As Creoles, we are as close, if not closer, anthropologically speaking, to the people of the Seychelles, of Mauritius, or the Reunion, than we are to the Puerto Ricans or the Cubans (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiant, 1993, p. 94). Hence, even if we use anthropology to define these relations, the bottom line is that Creoles share a solidarity in local terms, with all the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, but they share more affinities with those living in other Francophone archipelagos. This also highlights my central argument that the Caribbean should not be homogenized.

This solidarity can also be observed in Glissant’s (1997a) articulations of place and memory:

Contre L’universel généralisant [qui subliner la dignité de la personne à partir de la réalité de la propriété privée] le premiers recours est la volonté rèche de rester au lieu. Mais le lieu en ce qui nous concerne n’est pas seulement la terre où notre peuple fut déporté, c’est aussi l’histoire qu’il a partagée avec d’autres communautés, don’t la convergence apparait aujourd’hui.¹² (Glissant, 1997a, p. 426).

Considering creolization, Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant (1993, p. 89) explicitly highlight the “kaleidoscopic totality” of their idea, denying any attempt of synthesis or unity in the name of “the nontotalitarian consciousness of a preserved diversity.” By contrast, regarding transculturation, Ortiz (1947) argues for generalization, even partial ones, when he describes the concept of culture. The related descriptions propose culture as the exchange of “genetic” information in the curation of a “new organism.”

Ortiz (1947) also seems to accept the possibility of concomitantly understanding the local affiliations of transculturation as a concept and its potential generalization. The title of his book’s appendix, for instance, articulates both dimensions, as follows: a general one, called “on the social phenomenon of transculturation,” and a local one, discussing this concept in Cuba’s context. Ortiz (1947) is one of the central thinkers about the Cubanidad as an expression of the national feeling. We observe in several instances his concern about “Cuban particularities” when he describes the number of people, the disappearance of others, the intensity of migration, the types of economy, and so on. These descriptions ascribe an exceptional position to the island, “whose history, more than that of any other country of America, is an intense, complex, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in a state of transition” (Ortiz, 1947, p. 103).

¹² Against the generalizing universal [which sublines the dignity of the person from the reality of private property] the first recourse is the unwillingness to remain in place. But the place as far as we are concerned is not only the land where our people were deported, it is also the history that they shared with other communities, the convergence of which appears today (translated by author).

Nonetheless, since the beginning, Ortiz contextualizes transculturation within an international disciplinary debate, addressing critiques of the conceptualization of cultural change in terms of acculturation. At this level, Cuba is just an exploratory case, a good example that confirms, through its particularity, a general rule: “The concept of transculturation is fundamental and indispensable for an understanding of the history of Cuba, and, for analogous reasons, of that of America in general” (Ortiz, 1947, p. 103). He also appeals to the “unimpeachable authority” of Bronislaw Malinowski, the eminent social anthropologist as a rhetorical strategy to legitimize the concept’s usage: “Under his eminent sponsorship, I have no qualms about putting the term into circulation” (Ortiz, 1947, p. 103). Here, the use of sponsorship¹³ indicates, this line not only acts as a rhetorical strategy, but also highlights the power and inequality inherent in the field of anthropology.

Although transculturation and creolization share similarities regarding the relationship between particularization and generalization, Ortiz (1947) pays more attention to the Caribbean and the American continent, whereas Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiante (1993) highlight insular dynamics across the world.

The colonial encounter

As both transculturation and creolization relate to intense cultural and social transformations, I compare the configuration of the colonial encounter. The two concepts most importantly converge on the extreme brutality and violence present in the colonial encounters. In the excerpt below, Ortiz (1947) remarks on the encounter between Europe and the New World:

They were two worlds that discovered each and collided head-on. The impact of the two on each other was terrible. One of them perished, as though struck by lightning. It was a transculturation that failed as far as the natives were concerned and was profound and cruel for the new arrivals. The aboriginal human basis of society was destroyed in Cuba, and it was necessary to bring in a completely new population. (Ortiz, 1947, p. 100).

Ortiz’s (1947) formulation has been contested precisely for silencing the violence of the colonial encounter. Fischer (2004) refers to transculturation’s violent manifestations within the phenomenon of the sugar plantation, as the “vast machine in which uprooted and displaced people from distant regions of the African continent were meshed together and forced to enter a process later euphemistically called transculturation” (p. 12). Fischer (2004) is critical of the culturalist emphasis in Ortiz’s (1947) narrative – which emphasizes a transculturation that failed – for the colonial encounter. Thus, according to Fischer (2004), this perspective includes only the two alternatives of either incorporation or abortion, and does not denounce the violence inherent in such hierarchical interactions.

Although the *Eloge de la créolité* (Chamoiseau; Bernabé; Confiante, 1993) does not contain explicit and dramatic descriptions as does Ortiz’s (1947) work, it provides sufficient evidence for the “brutal encounter[s]” or “nonharmonious mixture” that unfolded because of colonialism. Specifically, Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiante (1993) describe the intensity of the colonial encounters as an unfinished mixture, whereas Ortiz (1947) uses the word “trance” to describe that both the oppressor and oppressed lived in the same atmosphere of terror:

13 In the original Spanish text, the word is “padrino,” which means “godfather.”

All, those above and those below, living together in the same atmosphere of terror and oppression, the oppressed in terror of punishment, the oppressor in terror of reprisals, all beside justice, beside adjustment, beside themselves. All in the painful [trance]¹⁴ of transculturation. (Ortiz, 1947, p. 102).

In my view, the displacement of individuals and the characterization of transculturation using the religious term “trance” underline the need for a ritual to establish a new humanity. It also offers a form of resolution, different from creolization, which proposes an unfinished mixture.

CONCLUSIONS

Le Divers, qui n'est pas le chaotique ni le stérile, signifie l'effort de l'esprit humain vers une relation transversale, sans transcendance universaliste.

Diversity, which is neither chaos nor sterility, means the human spirit's striving for a cross-cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence;

Glissant (1997a, p. 327).

[Translated by the author]

In the introduction to *The Creolization of theory*, Lionnet and Shih (2011) point out the risk of unmoored uses of creolization as a “merely playful bricolage or transculturalism,” advising that without “an anchor in history, creolization can become too pliable, like any other concept that might too easily be decontextualized, such as hybridity, mixture, bricolage, and transculturation” (p. 25). A systematic comparison of the various definitions of transculturation and creolization allows examining the accuracy of assumptions, as expressed by Lionnet and Shih (2011). Indeed, in the original formulation, there is no playful or historical decontextualization of transculturation. Therefore, instead of claiming a distance between creolization and transculturation, the problem may be the emergence of new theories that do not carefully evaluate previous ideas and approaches.

Concerning the increasing use of creolization and its decreased explanatory potential, Stephan Palmié (2007) raises an interesting point, asking:

If the whole world is in creolization these days, how are we to talk about people whose local worlds are the products of centuries of struggle against those violent and dehumanizing processes out of which the global (post) modernity we currently inhabit ultimately emerged? (Palmié, 2007, p. 193).

This important question pushes us to find new ways of applying these concepts. Nevertheless, scholars should proceed with caution when extending these terms to current theories of globalization. Historians and ethnographers have evaluated the complex issue of whether these terms can be extended to globalization theories (Hannerz, 1987, 1996; Mintz 1992, 1998; Price 1992; Hall, 2003; Palmié, 2007) and most agree that the historical realities of creolization and transculturation, where enslaved

¹⁴ This word was not translated from the original text.

people were literally treated as things rather than as persons, are too extreme to serve as models of contemporary cultural mixtures. These caveats are indicative of the challenges that history and ethnography can pose to theory. Yet, one must not forget that *Eloge de la Créolité* (1997) is a text in which literature, history, and social and aesthetic theory all come into play. Furthermore, the fact that many scholars, such as the literary and cultural critic Jossianna Arroyo-Martínez (2003), read Freyre and Ortiz demonstrates the literary potential of these authors' writing.

Therefore, the concepts of transculturation and creolization also have considerable potential for linking political and disciplinary conditions, and have many similarities and differences. Some of the dichotomies that these concepts help to bridge include the following: anthropology and literature; national and global politics; systematization and openness; evolution and juxtaposition; and trance and brutal violence. This study clarified these concepts' definitions to signal their points of convergence and divergence by addressing the aspects of temporality, cultural interactions, particularization versus generalization, and the violence of the colonial encounter. Glissant's (1997a) book appears in several parts of this article as a *leitmotif*, not only to emphasize the exercise of comparison but also in relation to another text of the Francophone tradition, *Eloge de la Créolité* (1997) by Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant. By comparing these texts, I hope that literary critics can better understand the potentialities and the complexity of the phenomena they encompass.

I expect this discussion of creolization and transculturation to enrich debates on literature and cultural studies through the North–South divide. This conceptual comparison also encourages critics to think about these terms beyond their referential texts; that is, to move beyond the impasses of reading literary works *before* concepts or *with* conceptual essentializations. The theoretical dilemma posed at the beginning of this article was how to *register* the different changes a concept undergoes when resituated in a different reality. If a concept defines the paradigm of intelligibility of a certain reality, then, I also think that a reflection on such concept locally and beyond must examine the notion of the literary form itself. The literary form allows one to approach the notions of disorders, deformations, and deviations that such concepts produce, without which such concepts are not conceivable. Thus, while using concepts such as creolization and transculturation, scholars must consider not only their similarities and differences but also their deformations. In this sense, I hope that the conceptual comparison presented in this article leads to a richer reading of literary works to trace the complex deviations of concepts, nationally and transnationally.

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