CREOLIZATION, creolity, creole—terms that, even until a few decades ago, were connected almost exclusively to societies of the New World—have seen their semantic field extended in such a way that they have provided a fundamental contribution to theoretical questions in the social sciences. The polysemic aspects of these terms and their application to social forms removed from any localization refer in fact to two major diptychs that help comprehend social constructions: singularity versus universality and process versus production. The question here is to examine the modalities under which the notion of creolization has been put to use. It is subject to a dual constraint with, on one side, a universal dimension that seems to be responsible for removing the particular and therefore singularizing historical conditions of its creation and, on the other, the leading role given to the logic of the process that reduces the consistency of permanent identities, habitus, and other continuities and social productions. The focus here is on the creole world of the Americas, but it takes advantage of the ability of the word “creolization” to integrate contemporary theoretical trends that have used it to lay the foundations of a radical conceptualization of social formations, no matter where they are located. Taking this expansion outside the “original” source of the notion is nonetheless seen as arriving at a better understanding of what makes American creolization unique. The matrix of plantation societies, like the chaotic encounters that preceded its establishment are seen here as creating the specific conditions of a certain relationship to the Other and the construction of social universes where cultural forms are seen as remaining dependent on the historical context of their formation. Against the idea that seeks to remove social constructions from their conditions of possibility and only see them from the perspective of their intrinsic mutability, it is a question of installing creolization as a “mode of being” dependent on an historical experience that is itself subject to the extremely significant and coercive power of categorization that can be found in the racialized systems of societies based on slavery. This “mode of being” is not a simple
disposition to change, as creolization is typically understood, but the invention of ways to come to terms with power. This is at least the argument which this article hopes to develop to show how the plurality that is perceptible in creole worlds is not the unconditional sign of a permanent transformation, but a way to disperse power or restrict it to certain areas.

The progression proposed here, which is presented mainly as an exploration of theory, follows three stages that will lead us to the heart of this proposal. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it will first turn to the existing literature to demonstrate that the notion of creolization in the world of the Americas, when it is seen from the perspective of the “process-cultural production” couplet, is far from obtaining general approval, but leaves open all possibilities, from the lability of affiliations to the existence of “closed” identities, defining “four major regions” of the term’s signification. The second stage will allow us to question singularity within a concept where creolization was defined, implicitly or explicitly, as universal. It will be the opportunity to introduce a position on the definition attributed to the universal by following the notions of diffusion and invariance, and in the ethical implications of recourse to universality. Based on these theoretical clarifications, we will be able to pass to the concluding third stage, with an analytical perspective where creolization is not seen as a perpetual process of transformation but as a particular way of negotiating with constraints that arise from any regime of codes implied in the social relationships and unique context of the matrix of slavery from which cultural forms emerge that rely on intimate and deep knowledge of the modalities of exercising power over others.

The Four Major Meanings of Creolization based on the “Process-Production” Couplet

Defining the “Regions” of Signification of Creolization

To begin, the answer to the question, “What is creolization?” can seem simple. We could rely on the rather broad consensus around a definition like the one Robert Baron and Ana Cara have proposed, especially as it has the advantage of “bringing together” the two angles of approach that concern us here:

Creolization is cultural creativity in process. When cultures come into contact, expressive forms and performances emerge from their encounter, embodying the sources that shape them, yet constituting new and different entities. Fluid in their adaptation to changing circumstances and open to multiple meanings, creole forms are expressions of culture in transition and transformation. Traditionally associated with the New World cultures of Caribbean and Latin American creole societies, creolization is now increasingly viewed as a universal process that could occur anywhere cultures encounter one another (Baron and Cara 2003, 4).1

1. The French translations of English used in the original text are by the author [Translator’s note: The original English translations have been restored when possible.]
Looking closer, things are not, however, quite so simple and it quickly becomes limiting to translate creolization solely as a process of cultural change that first occurred in the New World, predisposing cultures to be constantly changing and already prefiguring its universal characteristics now that globalization participates in the mixing of cultures. As interpreted by an increasing number of authors, who are also critical of the latent naivety and romanticism that accompany creolization (Romberg 2005, 182), the concept suffers from its use “in every direction” without being the object of solid theorization. A lack of “consistent and explicit theoretical foundations” can be detected (Bolland 2002, 18), as there is a confrontation between uses destined to describe a historical process, to theorize it, or to give it a political purpose (Romberg 2005, 177). Creolization has shown itself to be particularly revelatory of the extreme permeability between academic models and ideological aims (Price 2001; Romberg 2005; Trouillot 1998).

The etymological approach to the term alone is sufficient to show that there is no clear consensus accorded to the theme of métissage and the encounter of cultures in creolization. In the most serious works, the root “creole” is sometimes imputed to a Spanish origin (Chaudenson 1995, 3), sometimes Portuguese (Corominas 1973, 178), or other times to Kikongo (Warner-Lewis 2003, 323). And while there does seem to be some agreement that the first uses of the word designated the white populations born in the colonies of the New World—participating in the “separation” from the homeland that is a precursor to the imagination of modern nations so well described by Benedict Anderson (1983)—there is quickly new confusion where it seems impossible to determine the first application of the term to qualify groups, be they white, black, or mixed race (Allen 2002, 50–51). In the same way, the symbolic charge of the notion comes in a very confused manner, whether it continues to be connoted by the “creole” grandeur of the “white” dynasty stuck in its ideal of racial purity; whether it evokes the “degradation,” the “pollution,” or the “bastardization,” of a cultural entity conceived of as originally “pure” within a strongly hierarchized cultural universe (Romberg 2005, 192–193; Szwed 2003, 9–10); or whether it is filled on the contrary with the rich, positive values given to mixing, diversity, polyphonia, and eventually to everything that has made métissage and cosmopolitanism major points of reference today for the ethics of a new humanism that is very present in contemporary

2. The reader will find in the work of Carolyn Allen (2002) a review of the different etymological origins given to the term “creole,” as well as a quick survey of its political and historical uses. According to Robert Chaudenson (Chaudenson 1995, 4), the first academic occurrence of the term dates from 1869 in the field of linguistics, with a study of Creole grammar in Trinité (Trinidad). For his part, Richard Price notes the use of the term “creolization” in English to refer to cultural forms starting in 1928, in a letter addressed to the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits (Price 2011). The first international conference on Creoles, held in 1959 at the University of the West Indies, inaugurated the formation of a distinct field of linguistic studies, participating undoubtedly in the broader return to the notion in the human sciences (Chaudenson 1995; Allen 2002). From this point of view, the work by the historian Kamau Brathwaite published in 1971—The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica. 1770–1820—is generally considered to be the precursor of the theses of creolization and remains just as influential today more than forty years after its publication (Shepherd and Richards 2002).
And the severe critiques of the current theses on creolization come from this contradiction between the different types of content where, on the one hand, there is the violence of power relationships and, on the other hand, the tendency to praise the beauty of an aesthetics of intermingling.

These critiques more particularly address the perspective that has been present in the French Caribbean since the publication of the famous literary manifesto—_Éloge de la créolité/ In Praise of Creoleness_—written by the Martinican writers Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant (1993), which has been abundantly commented beyond any language barriers by specialists of African-American cultures. For example, Raquel Romberg criticizes these texts, which began with artistic or aesthetic intentions, for becoming a “social theory” that was “beyond critique” due to their intense valorization of the attributes of hybridity, and which occurred “to the detriment of the socio-historical aspects of the process of creolization” (Romberg 2005, 186). For their part, Richard and Sally Price (1997) have produced an uncompromising text where they examine step-by-step the contradictions of an identity that is proclaimed to be tending towards diversity (which is referred to as _diversality_ in _In Praise of Creoleness_). For this identity could become very “insular,” excluding the pan-Caribbean perspective and giving in, moreover, to the folkloric illusion deployed by French cultural policies, where assimilation also operates through the celebration of heritage, making inhabitants of Martinique into spectators of their own culture to help them forget the omnipresence of the highly merchandized environment of metropolitan France (Price 1997).

As soon as we delve into the debate surrounding a seemingly clear notion, a dense network of contradictions and uncertainty appears. This situation is all the more surprising in that most of the specialists seem to rely on consensual statements and leading figures, such as Kamau Brathwaite (1971), Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992), Rex Nettleford (1978), and Édouard Glissant (1990),

3. On cosmopolitanism, see the debate between Craig Calhoun (2003) and Rogers Brubaker (2003). The former defined this intellectual posture as a “kind of virtuous deracination,” a belief in “a liberation from the possibly illegitimate, and in any case blinking, attachments of locality, ethnicity, religion, and nationality” (Calhoun 2003, 544).

4. The bilingual edition of the work when first published certainly helped this work become known outside the Francophone sphere. For a perspective on the strong repercussions of these works, see Wendy Knepper (2006); Verene Shepherd and Glen Richards (2002); John Szwed (2003).

5. On the French side, I will indicate the equally severe critiques of Michel Giraud (1997) or Raphaël Lucas (1999) regarding the manifesto of creolity. On this point, as much as it seems to me to be legitimate to discuss the “theoretical” theses contained in the essays of writers who then become theorists—in the framework of a “conceptual development” which is the common lot of the work of critical reflection on research (including for writer-theorists) and that supposes a search for matches between theories and manifestations of reality—it also seems difficult to require the work of a novelist to provide a social vision that matches these same manifestations. In other words, the creolity/creolization of the novelist—when it is fed by an aesthetic project and not by a theoretical intention like in _In Praise_—is not required to be “true” or “precise,” and the deformation of reality that it is prepared to offer can just as well provide teachings as a presumably adequate description. At least, this is how I approached the novel _Tezako_ by Patrick Chamoiseau (1992), in which the analysis of departures from “realist” representation was a way to gain a better understanding of what the book shares with an anthropological study, in other words, the world of Martinican peasants (see Chivallon 1996).
whose writings are not fundamentally different. This perception of relatively broad agreement is due to the fact that the central thesis of creolization is generally defined in opposition to the “Afrocentric” thesis; and this opposition polarizes the attention while covering over, in the end, the disagreements that are rarely up for discussion in the sphere of supporters of creolization. One of the basic statements that serves to unite them can be found in the assertion that creolization “is process and not product.” This characteristic was declared straightaway by Verene Shepherd and Glen Richards (2002) in the collection of texts they coedited, and that was dedicated to analyzing the discourses on creolization, a characteristic they took from the definition of Kamau Brathwaite, where creolization is seen as:

a cultural process which … may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case the enslaved/African to the European); and inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship proceeding from this yoke. The creolisation which results (and it is process not a product), becomes the tentative cultural norm of the society (Brathwaite 1974, 6; cited in Shepherd and Richards 2002, XI).

The process therefore takes precedence over the “product” or “cultural production”: creolization is not a social creation that could be aimed at stabilization but a form in constant becoming. This is what Édouard Glissant’s vision summarizes in regards to creolization—a “mode of entanglement”—when he writes: “What is exemplary about creolization is its process, not its content; the latter only appears to drive it” (Glissant 1990, 103). It explains the Martinique author’s well-known distancing from the concept of “creolity,” which he sees as participating in the definition of identities that regress towards “models of humanity,” “generalizing Negritudes, Frenchness, Latinity” (Glissant 1990, 103). The “product” is therefore involved in different conceptions that one could think were destined, almost unanimously, to reveal a dynamic of constant capacity for change. For some, creolity is even seen as a response to Negritude, in the sense that its aims in terms of identity remain the same, in other words “problematizing a universal identity on the basis of a certain difference” (Frindethie 1998). Even the somewhat uncertain call by Wendy Knepper to distinguish, on the one hand, “creolity” as a “theory of multiple identity” where the paradox between the terms “identity” and “diversity” remains definitively unresolved and, on the other hand, “creolization” seen as a “continuous process of adaptation to the diversity of the world” (Knepper 2006, 79), resumes relatively well the omnipresent risk of speaking of the thing and its opposite within a set of discourses where locating the contours of social, political, and cultural belonging enters into contradiction with the will to place no limit on the collective definition.

The terms adopted by specialists of creolization to describe forms as “Euro-creole,” “Afro-creole,” or even “Meso-creole” nonetheless imply the presence of

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6. This typology is already present in the model of plural society by Michael G. Smith (1965) seen as hierarchized with, on one side, a “dominant European creole tradition” and, on the other, an “African
“something” that enables the process, at a given moment, to take on qualifying attributes. It may even have come to completion or brought about results. While the idea of change through process is eminently present in Brathwaite’s work, he also refers to the idea of cultural “orientations” and bases a large portion of his work on well-known types of socio-ethnic components, with one chapter even called “Folk Culture of the Slaves.” Creolization then appears to limit itself to mimetic procedures performed by the elite of color, making difficult “a conscious use of the wealth of its own folk culture” (Brathwaite 1971, 212, 300, and 308). This back-and-forth can also be found with Rex Nettleford, when creolization, as a “disruptive process,” seems to lead to a “new order” and allow room for the existence of “distinctive groups,” “segments” carrying cultural differences including those of the “lower classes” which continue to develop their “little tradition” in the face of European hegemony (Nettleford 1978, 2, 9, and 10). The presence of concrete cultural forms takes us away from a social vision of perpetual recomposition. It seems to indicate a landing place after a clash. Paradoxically, before the powerful dynamics that are seen as constantly at work, it signals a primordial creole culture” (see Bolland 2002, 16). Brathwaite built his interpretation of creolization against this model while preserving the designation of types of cultural orientations (Euro-creole, Afro-creole, …), which he saw as inter-connected more than segmented (Brathwaite 1971, 231 and 310). The same typology can be found, among others, in the work of Rex Nettleford (cited in Bolland 2002, 27) and Jean Besson (2003).

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creolization. To put it another way, there would be either an original and accomplished process, or a process in becoming.

By crossing the poles of these problematic couplets (process/production; origin/becoming) it is possible to obtain a figure that describes four major areas of meaning, from the thesis of creolization to its antithesis. It breaks with the apparent semantic homogeneity of the notion, which, as we have seen, quickly relies exclusively on the idea of mixing or cultural permeability, and instead displays strong disparities underlying the approach to the cultural worlds that came from the American experience of slavery. The table summarizes the content of these four areas of interpretation and makes reference to the major works that served as the basis for this content.

**Creolization as a Continuous Process: from Process to Process [1]**

The first “region of meaning” goes beyond the interpretations taken from the experience of the New World, but not without having experienced their influence. It includes the vast myriad of social theories associated with the “cultural turn” and that occupy the anti-essentialist posture destined to remove any temptation to assign fixed, immutable, or intrinsic content to social forms. This is not the place to develop these theories more fully, as they are now well-established in the academic landscape and well-commented. I will only mention a passage from James Clifford—an author whose notion of “traveling cultures” (Clifford 1992) has become authoritative—which illustrates how cultures coming from processes remain processes, caught in a constitutive movement which means they never harden:

Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes. But what would happen, I began to ask, if travel were untethered, seen as a complex and perspective spectrum of human experiences? Practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension (Clifford 1997, 3).

More recently, James Clifford has sought to recognize the mobility instituting the lability of any social construction with populations seen as the least “travelling”—“indigenous” peoples or “natives”—to conclude with the intrication of practices of localization and dispersion, calling for the surprising union of two terms to designate, like an oxymoron, “indigenous diasporas” (Clifford 2006, 55). In this conception, process is the most important from start to end, leaving no chance for identities to crystallize, signaling, as Arjun Appadurai has declared

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7. For a more extensive reflection on the theoretical trends grouped under the prefix “post-” (postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism), allow me to refer to the following works, on postmodernism associated with a movement of thought and not the description of an era (Chivallon 1999); on postcolonialism and its implications on the theories of diasporas (Chivallon 2004; 2007b); and on the new role assigned to the imagination in social theories (Chivallon 2007a). See also the issue of *L’Homme* (Assayag 2008) which offers “transatlantic mirrors” that allow a perspective on the “post-isms” of the theories of recent decades.
the end of cultures of “habitus” caught up in the overflowing imagination that accompanies these eternally mobile cultures. This “habitus” that we cannot know whether it existed at a point in time, because of the extensive mixing of considerations relative to generalities on social construction and those connected to the very contemporary specificities of globalization; and the risk of accusations of essentialism only makes the conceptual efforts around the idea of “constancy” or “reproduction” all the more perilous. On this last point, Rogers Brubaker sees it as a shift to a “soft constructivism” that develops “limp” or “weak” concepts of identity, preventing an examination of the “hard dynamics … of identity politics” (Brubaker 2001, 66).

For all intents and purposes, Ulf Hannerz, in his foundational text of 1987 on “The World in Creolization,” can be considered the “courier” between the concepts developed concerning the Caribbean and those that apply to the rest of the “world,” arguing for the benefit of using the “concept of creole culture” in cultural studies (Hannerz 1987, 551). His perspective yields slightly to the call for “everything in movement” and consists more of confirming the movement and fluidity at work in the contemporary world based on the situation in Nigeria, making creolization a “process” situated in time, more particularly in the second half of the twentieth century (Hannerz 1987, 551). In a later text, the question of knowing whether this process is definitively “universal” and a-historical, reaching the “center” as much as the “periphery,” is directly asked and just as clearly answered: “At some point or other, we or our forefathers may all have been creolized, but we are not forever engaged in it to the same degree” (Hannerz 1996, 15). We are thus well within a configuration that allows us to see the continuous unfolding of a process that has presumably known periods of more or less activity.

Closer to the Caribbean and societies based on slavery, and in a zone of influence that reaches beyond them, the models of Stuart Hall (1994a) and Paul Gilroy (1993) can be seen as exemplary inscriptions of this “cultural turn” in the creole world. The affiliation is all the easier to establish in that Stuart Hall is considered to be one of the founding fathers of Cultural Studies (Mattelart and Neveu 2003). “Anti-essentialism” for one (Hall 1994a) and “anti-anti-essentialism” for the other (Gilroy 1993), more interested than the first in getting away from “binary encoding,” the two conceptions nonetheless converge to offer social forms moved by the principle of hybridity, a master word that connotes a universe where the “words of creolization” are found: interculturality, métissage, variability, heterogeneity, diversity, and so forth. Here again, everything is process, since identities “are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 1994a, 401–402). There is therefore no more need to envisage a “before” or an “after,” an origin or a becoming: everything is drawn towards the “desire to transcend … the constraints of ethnicity” (Gilroy 1993, 19).

8. This text by Ulf Hannerz (Hannerz 1987, 557) refers to the work of Kamau Brathwaite (1971).
Creolization as Resulting in Becoming: from Product to Process [2]

The second “region of meaning” is clearly distinguished from the first—at least this is true when applied to the Caribbean—when it focuses precisely on the distinction between two moments: the existence of stabilized cultural productions preceding the moment of the start of the process of creolization, which now seems no longer capable of being stopped. The idea is exemplified in the approach of Édouard Glissant, for whom the cycle of dispossession through slavery that started in Africa eradicates the “prior country,” the “cultural back-country” (Glissant 1981, 125, 131) and prevents the “people” from continuing somewhere else, to continue “being” (Glissant 1981, 29). Thus “the atavistic community of language, religion, government system, and traditional values” that “African nations” could have “raised against [colonial action]” (Glissant 1981, 131) was compromised. More recently, Édouard Glissant has renewed this vision where the idea of a continuous process of cultural transformation—which could be universal—is definitively cast aside to assert the break or the passage between stable cultural productions and the dynamics of change that precede creolization, in all its historicity:

Everywhere, therefore, where foundation myths appear, in cultures that I call atavistic cultures, the notion of identity will be developed around the axis of filiation and legitimacy: in depth, it is the unique root that excludes the other as a participant … As for societies where foundation myths do not function, societies of creolization—the notion of identity is created around frameworks of the Relationship which understands the other as inferred (Glissant 1996, 62–63).

This same concept is found in part in the work of Brathwaite (1971) and Nettleford (1978), who see the origin of the relationships between cultures as dependent on the existence of cultural spheres that were once very differentiated before the “disruptive process” intervened. However, as we have already noted, this process could still have concluded with “something else,” hesitations that bring these works very close to the fourth “region of meaning,” where creolization, which Brathwaite does not want to see as a “product,” leads to constants that are seen as a new configuration:

It is during this period [of slavery] that we can see how the African, imported from the area of his “great tradition,” went about establishing himself in a new environment, using the available tools and memories of his traditional heritage to set going something new, something Caribbean, but something nevertheless recognizably African (cited in Mintz and Price 1992, xi).

If we base it on its performative utterance alone, the creolity of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant could belong to this same group. The “yoke of history” brought singular cultural “Caribbean, European, African, Asian,

9. One may think that the models of Hall or Gilroy are not conceived of as universal but remain proper to cultural worlds of the Black Americas, since they are defined by each of the authors in opposition to cultures called “ethnicist” or “nationalist.” For a more complete analysis of these theoretical perspectives, see Christine Chivallon (2004 and 2008).
and Levantine” elements together in the same place, giving birth to creolity in its dynamic dimension: “an interactional aggregate,” “a maelstrom of signifieds” (Bernabé et al. 1993, 26–27). Multiplicity carries the day, not fixed identities, as Raphaël Confiant writes:

Creole does not have a new identity like Gallo-Roman or Arab-Berber, but new identities. The phenomenon of creolization has entirely invented the multiple identity (cited in Knepper 2006, 72).

**Original Creolization: from Primordial Process to Product [3]**

With this third semantic domain, we reach one of the most influential models for the study of cultural forms that emerged from trans-Atlantic slavery, the one developed by American anthropologists Richard Price and Sidney Mintz, known and designated by the authors themselves as the “encounter model” (Price and Mintz 1992, 7). Written and presented publicly in 1973, and published for the first time in 1976 under the title *An Anthropological Approach to the Caribbean Past*, their essay was given a more extensive publication in 1992, with a new preface and a new title: *The Birth of African-American Culture. An Anthropological Perspective.* 10 More than twenty years later, the authors reaffirmed that despite the fact that rewriting would have certainly brought new contributions, the message delivered remained the same and would have even been supported further by advances in research (Price and Mintz 1992, xii). The new title is significant in terms of the perspective of this theoretical contribution: the perspective of a “birth,” a process that participates in new creations. The authors broke with ideas related to the continuity of the institutional forms of African cultures transshipped to the Americas. Slaves arrived in the New World more in the state of “heterogeneous crowds”—and not as “groups”—which means that the “specific institutions of African societies were not … transferred identically to their new contexts” (Price and Mintz 1992, 18–19). Yet instead of seeing this chaotic encounter as the implementation of an incessant transformation where nothing is called upon to be consolidated, the anthropologists identified what they explained to be “institution building,” which indicates that the “organizational task of enslaved Africans in the New World was that of creating institutions— institutions that would prove responsive to the needs of everyday life under the limiting conditions imposed on them by slavery” (Price and Mintz 1992, 19 and 82). There is no need to say that this takes us away from the evanescent foundation of identity lability to take on avowed forms of social organization related to work, parentage, sexual roles, and religion, and that participate in transforming the available materials into a “new tradition” (Price and Mintz 1992, 41). This places us firmly in the perspective of creations which, although resulting from upheaval, still lead to a stabilization of systems of reference:

10. See on this point, the retrospective view of Richard Price and the responses he provides to criticisms of the encounter model (Price 2001 and 2011).
The rapidity with which a complex, integrated, and unique African-American religious system developed in Surinam at an early stage is surprising to say the least (Price and Mintz 1992, 49).

Thus creolization, in the beginning, was a “Big Bang” like the one physicists suggest was at the beginning of the universe, as Richard Price recently reaffirmed (Price 2011). It is the “miracle” of creolization, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Trouillot 1998) calls it where, under conditions of extreme violence from the shock of encounters, unprecedented cultural forms emerged that involve several sectors, from small farming systems in the Caribbean to the musical expressions of New Orleans. Defending a dynamic that is still at work with the fundamental role that they assign to social interactions and “openness to ideas and usages from other cultural traditions,” to “innovation,” to “individual creativity,” dispositions that bear witness “to an expectation of continuous dynamism” (Mintz and Price 1992, 51), the artisans of the encounter model nevertheless do not sacrifice, on the altar of diversity, the discovery of (re)productions in the cultures of the Caribbean. Through the experience of the Saramaka of Surinam, Richard Price is able to confirm the presence of “rituals,” “the process of legitimizing a newly created institution that took place nearly three centuries earlier,” a religion for which the principles were established in the eighteenth century and which “remains very close to its current form,” a Saramaka society which, during its foundation at the time of the peace treaties of 1762, “was closer to the society of today … than it was to Africa,” and finally to speculate:

It might be more analytically rigorous, then, to limit “creolization” to the initial processes of culture change and to describe the subsequent processes of change in these societies, insofar as it is useful, in terms of their similarity and divergence from those initial processes (Price 2011, 523).

According to an entirely different perspective, it is possible to situate “creolity” in this third “region,” the creolity that I indicated was part of the previous area and that is deconstructed here in the way described by Édouard Glissant, Richard and Sally Price, and the other authors already mentioned. The multiple identity founded by the “original chaos” continuously perpetuating itself in a “mangrove of virtualities,” (Bernabé et al. 1993) could then be reduced to an affirmation of identity, one that is all the more circumscribed in that the frequently used “We” is always opposed to a “Them” throughout an essay which, we must not forget, is driven by the intention to serve as a manifesto reducing identity to its desire to establish a program.

**Creolization “In-Between” or Nullified: from Product to Product [4]**

In this final “region,” I will only examine the “threshold” of the antithesis of creolization, in other words the thesis of continuity, which refuses to see trans-Atlantic experience as a break with the African cultural foundation. For this reason, in this group, I will indicate the works that can be considered to be intermediaries between the two major factions/blocks of interpretations
structuring the anthropology of the African-American world. On the one side, there is the break carried out by creolization and, on the other, African continuity. This “boundary” position is particularly well-illustrated in the contributions of Melville Herskovits (1946, 1993) and Roger Bastide (1967). Neither of them definitively rejects either of these possibilities, but sees them as part of a continuum, as Bastide puts it, between communities that are more subject than others to the processes of acculturation, and obliged to “invent new forms of life in society” like the blacks in the United States and others—in particular the “Nègre Marron civilizations”\(^{11}\)—who maintained “entire sections of African civilizations” (Bastide 1967, 49, 53). In this case, the process of change does not alter recognition of the initial cultural “product,” which is just as present at its origin as in its becoming. The pioneering work of Herskovits, with his famous “scale of intensity of Africanisms in the New World,” already introduced the idea of degrees of deterioration of African heritage and “arranged” different aspects of social life observed in several places in the Americas into a classification that went from “very African” to “traces of African customs” (Herskovits 1946). Yet because the possibility of change remains strong, as shown by the notions that remain associated with these writers—syncretism for Herskovits (1993), *bricolage* for Bastide (1970)—it remains difficult to give this writing a place other than in-between. Moreover, it is remarkable to note, following the work of Robert Baron (2003), how much the metaphors used by Herskovits in his works and field notebooks outline a semantic field that, it would not be hard to believe, the most cutting-edge Cultural Studies writers used as a source for the vocabulary of hybridity: “amalgam,” “mosaic,” “mixture,” “intertwining,” “fusion,” “convergence,” “assemblage,” and so forth.

Delving deeper into the assertion of “African roots” that he identifies in Jamaican culture, the sociolinguist Mervyn Alleyne (1996) also uses the notion of continuum, albeit not for categorizing cultures created by slaves in the Americas from the most to the least “acculturated,” but to postulate the continued presence of African elements in the different cultural expressions developed within the world of slavery. Constructed as a deliberate counterpoint to the model of Mintz and Price (1992), Alleyne’s approach returns to that model, unbeknownst to the author, by speaking of “deep structures” that would come from the continuities detectable beneath new forms (Alleyne 1996, 8). This notion could appear interchangeable with that of the two other anthropologists who spoke of “deep cultural levels” and “underlying principles” to indicate the presence of shared cognitive orientations in a process of “inter-Africanist” creolization (Mintz and Price 1992; Price 2011). Often cited as a major reference for the assertion of African continuity, Alleyne’s thesis represents more of a moderate version that refuses the idea of an original break—the Big Bang or a renaissance—but without excluding transformations and adaptations. We have yet to enter the realm of the radical

\(^{11}\) Translator’s note: “marronnage” refers to the flight of a slave running away from a master in the colonial context.
antithesis of creolization, which is called Afrocentric with its Afrocentrist excesses. As rivals, these two major interpretations have animated the field of Caribbean anthropology since its foundation, a field which David Scott (Scott 1997, 21) has noted so appropriately was structured by an “epistemology of verification,” to know whether Black cultures of the Americas were African or dependent on slavery.

The controversy of “continuity versus creolization”—which continues to have an incredible longevity in its resonance and vivacity, as recent works demonstrate—contributes to the homogenization of a theoretical ensemble—creolization—without revealing its deep disparities and theoretical dispersal. Polarized concerning its origin—including when creolization is seen as an eternal becoming that therefore excludes all the more the notion of a common foundation—it tends to overlook both the modalities of social construction and the meaning taken on by social constructions in historical contexts of extreme social violence. The semantic domains I have just outlined are not limited to identifying uses that may be considered polysemic. Above all, they involve contrasted sociological models that do not envisage the foundations of social life in the same way or with the same theoretical intensity; and at the heart of these disagreements, there is the omnipresent yet avoided question of “singularity,” the evocation of which always threatens to immobilize what should remain unlimited, to essentialize what should not be assigned any particularity, and to localize what should be extended to universality alone.

Creolization: Universal or Localized?

The Confusing Universal

The most surprising of these wide extensions of meaning related to creolization is contained in the permanent opening onto the theme of the universal, which appears here and there in these works dedicated to the notion of creolization and its derivatives, especially the most recent ones. Within a literature which has, however, banned the term “universal” in the name of the rejection of metatheories and their claim to stating principles that are valid for all human societies, the affirmation of the “generalized” character of creole dynamics, hybridity, and mutability remains mostly implicit, a universality declared by default, given the rhetorical demands of Cultural Studies to transform the old categories of scientific knowledge. Yet, in writings that are intent on breaking with the establishment of “universal laws”—where there is an analysis that some have pertinently called “nomadological”—it is possible to find cultural métissage raised to the level of a principle shared by all social forms. The constant permeability of cultural registers or the non-permanence of cultural references becomes part of the ways to build


social worlds. Even if it means falling into what the critique of Cultural Studies quickly noted as a “new essentialism” with “everything in movement,” making the social being one that is indeterminate, contingent, and moving by definition, these approaches reject the oldest knowledge of a certain anthropology that identified the engagement of social systems “in a constant struggle against the deviations and imbalances that threaten them,” and generalized to “every society” the existence mechanisms of struggle and regulation against changes that always carry a risk of destabilizing upheaval (Balandier 1981, 105–109). The permeable character of cultures is therefore implicitly or explicitly raised to a new unsurmountable universal, to the point of even becoming “an annihilation of false universality” (Bernabé et al. 1993, 28), the universality of the modern conceptual apparatus only capable of distinguishing between “pure” categories, and thus establishing a world where the randomness of diversity and intermingling remained foreign.

In this case, creolization, as a universal, becomes naturally unavoidable, because the ontological response that it is supposed to bear, directs a counter-response, something that is “self-evident,” to the classic conceptions involving the notion of culture and, with it, any approach that can produce the specter of essentialism, or even only the simple “reproduction” of the constituents of social life. Let us return for a moment to what Serge Gruzinski, concerning creolization, wrote about “métisse thought” while remaining critical of the excesses of the new “planetary idiom” of cosmopolitanism:

To apprehend mixtures, we have to begin by being wary of the term “culture” which has been used down to the bone by generations of anthropologists, sociologists, and historians … Indeed, one has only to examine the history of any human group to realize that by admitting that this arrangement of practices and beliefs possesses some autonomy, it is closer to a constantly moving nebulous than a well-defined system (Gruzinski 1999, 34–36 and 45–46).

Integrating the generality of the dynamic intrinsic to culture, creolization then only needs to leave the platform of its localization, to detach itself from the experience of the New World to become a “universal paradigm.” This is clearly where the statements of Ulf Hannerz would lead—and his propensity for universalization has already been noted—when he affirms the pertinence of transporting the “creole idea” from the regions of American plantation society to any other cultural formation, since a “creolist approach is particularly applicable to the processes of cultural confluence within a more or less open continuum of diversity stretched along a structure of center-periphery relations” (Hannerz 1996, 14). In fact, it is no longer rare now to see calls, like the one from Robin Cohen, specialist of diasporas and other transnational phenomena, for “the universal applicability of the term [creole]” (Cohen 2007, 98).

14. On the risk of new essentialism carried by the so-called “anti-essentialist” approaches associated with Cultural Studies, see the discussion proposed in Christine Chivallon (2004 and 2007b). See also the diversity of perspectives that do not all express a “French-style rejection” of the branch formed by Postcolonial Studies in Marie-Claude Smouts (2007).
For authors who are specialists of the cultures forged in the matrix of these same plantation societies, the universality in question is seen as very ambiguous. In the introduction to the issue of the Journal of American Folklore dedicated to creolization, Robert Baron and Ana Cara start by evoking a “universal process” (Baron and Cara 2003, 4) only to suggest, a few lines later, the doubts that “creolists” have about the idea of an experience generalized to the entire planet. And they conclude with this paradoxical verdict:

Whether or not the concept of creolization can be universalized to apply it to all cultures that find themselves in an expressive interaction, creolity and the process of creolization will always have the deepest resonance and meanings for the populations that forged new cultures in the creole worlds emerging from the Americas and the Indian Ocean islands (Baron and Cara 2003, 8)

Deciding or not deciding between creolization as universal or singular may first mean resolving two confusions that I would like to consider here: references to globalization and ethical positioning. The second is much more delicate to approach than the first. It may also mean finding a way to return to a definition of “universal” that we would be hard pressed to see as opposed to an assertion of the singularity of the experiences of societies based on the slave trade and slavery.

The parasitic action of globalization appears clearly in the constellation of studies dedicated to its “cultural consequences,” to borrow from the French title of Arjun Appadurai’s famous work. It is not by chance that several authors who are familiar with the Caribbean have considered the shock of encounters in the Americas as a precursor to the contemporary recomposition of the world. The Caribbean is seen as “the prototype of the nomadic, modern, or postmodern ‘New World’” by Stuart Hall (1994a, 401), while Raphaël Confiant speaks of creolization as a “prefiguration” of what is “taking place before our eyes, throughout the world, especially in the Western megalopolises” (Confiant 1993, 266). The diagnosis is the same for Édouard Glissant, for whom “the term creolization applies to the current situation of the world” (Glissant 1996, 22). The acceleration of cultural exchanges and the increase in planetary decompartmentalization reinforce the idea of an unprecedented universality where the “laws of formation” would be expressed more acutely in plantation societies (Glissant 1990, 89). Here there is a blurring between the global diffusion of a model—globalization—and the domain of theorizing social constructs, a confusion that Serge Gruzinski warns of (Gruzinski 1999, 34–39), because globalization does not indicate the start of the mixture of cultures but its unbridled generalization, with the formidable omnipresence of phenomena of cultural telescoping. Like Jean-Loup Amselle, we will avoid postulating the passage to a generalized cultural intermingling from a previously compartmentalized cultural core, which would evoke a renewal of diffusionism, while cultures, no matter what they are, have always been in contact and have always been “mixed objects” before being closed traditionalities (Amselle 2001, 31–47). However, it is harder to continue following this author, even though it may help clarify the “universal” we seek, when he asserts somewhat surprisingly that globalization “is only another name for universality” (Amselle 2001, 46). I will rely
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on the Caribbean authors for the understanding they display in their essays and other manifestos that globalization is “one” social model among others, one that has spread extremely widely, a localized system that became global, the capitalist and free-market system “which spread across the planet with the blind force of a religion.”  

That its propagation led to the acceleration of cultural mixing does not in any way indicate the universality of the model itself, nor does it give an understanding at this stage of how mixing itself is universal.

This detour through the first confusion brought about by globalization allows us to situate creolization in its relationship to a universality that should not be understood—as we have just seen in relation to the contemporaneity of the societal system that overwhelms us—as the dissemination of a model, otherwise it would express a particularity that spreads. It should also not be understood as a scenario that began in the encounters of the New World, otherwise, once again, it would lead us back to the generalization of one particular amongst others. Creolization, if it has to be confined to the universal, could do so in the constancy of the phenomena of relations that it reveals, phenomena with more or less intensity depending on their historical context.

The second confusion comes from an ethical posture which appears to make it difficult to take the experience of the New World, the experience of the matrix of slavery, as special, without running the risk of validating, reproducing, or reifying the categories that this matrix generated and that established the racial hierarchies of societies in the New World. This unease is particularly well-expressed by Denis-Constant Martin on the subject of jazz, the creation of which, he hopes to show, far exceeds its “black” character and that he finds to be caught in a complex network of mixed innovations, universalization, and African-American localization. Using the work of Jocelyne Guibault on Trinidad, he sees the history of African-American music as an illustration “of a phenomenon through which some discourses construct musical projects in racial terms” and in doing so, perpetuate the “racial imagination” of American society, with the notion of “Black music” as definitively part of the racialized framework of the American project (Martin 2008, 112 and 114). It is remarkable to note how much the question of universality is omnipresent in the field of jazz studies, as if in this field more than other fields consecrated to African-American cultural creations, there was more urgency to remove “jazz” as an object from particularizing surroundings and to distance it from the idea of localized belonging.

There is no equivalent to this tension towards the universal in research conducted on other African-American elements,

15. See “Le manifeste de neuf intellectuels antillais pour des ‘sociétés post-capitalistes’” online at LeMonde.fr, dated February 16, 2009 and accessed from www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2009/02/16/neuf-intellectuels-antillais-contre-les-archaismes-coloniaux_1156114_823448.html. This manifesto is circulated with the title “Manifeste pour les produits de haute nécessité.” It is signed by the Martinican writers Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant, among others.

16. See on this point the issue of L’Homme (Jamin and Williams 2001) dedicated to jazz and some elements of reflection that it inspired on the question of universality versus singularity in Christine Chivallon (2008).
even aesthetic ones, where creolization is brought in to re-contextualize cultural practices (and not to “de-localize” them), as Stephan Palmié does, aligning himself with Sidney Mintz, and hoping to draw more attention “to concrete local structures of opportunity and constraints,” “to socially acquired dispositions,” and to consider them in their articulation with the structures of power they cannot escape (Palmié 2005, 105). Here, creolization, before becoming universal, relies primarily on its historicity. Yet the studies dedicated to jazz may only amplify the concern that gnaws much more quietly at the approach to creole societies, the concern not to enhance the ethnicization of social relationships already present in the socio-racial segmentation at the base of these societies. The semantic charge of creolization as a figure of intermingling, intertwining, and mixing presents itself as a refutation of what the slave-owning order wanted to establish: the hierarchical separation of groups on the basis of the phenotype of color transformed into powerful racial categories that guarantee white supremacy. In these societies where color obsessions reign (Bonniol 1992), creolization becomes the antithesis of the violence in the hardening of these categories as it suggests a rediscovery of the human universal beyond the artificiality of these distinctive speculations.

How then is it possible to recover the singularity of this experience with its paradoxical complexity? The strength of this category is that it is highly dependent on a biased and fundamentally localized history, and yet it gives way to an approach connected to the universality of a homogenous humanity, as if the racial matrix were emptied of any capability of producing effects other than giving rise to the universal. Chased out the door, the specter of “race” is about to return through the window, under a different guise that would not be the total destruction of an order but the disappearance of the consequences that such an order could have on human lives. Making creolization universal, without any other form of theoretical development than saying that it is the shared fate of humanity, is similar to minimizing the scope of the context that witnessed its creation, and to neglecting and even trivializing what David Scott has called the “structures of recognition, identification, and subjectification” (Scott 1997, 36) that restrict the development of identity. It means forgetting the position of the subject within the matrix of slavery, about which the anthropologist tells us that it endeavors to create the “destiny” of such a subject as “black” through “racialized social relations, ideological apparatuses and political regimes” (Scott 1997, 36). This does not mean recognizing a universality, if we agree on the obvious fact that not all populations on the planet share the immersion in the kind of historical context that came from the slave-owning plantations. Édouard Glissant says the same in his own way. The universality he sees is not that of a singular experience now globalized, but the lesson it presents to humanity, the results of which Denis-Constant Martin detects in jazz. The paradox of a singularity with a universal

17. “Within this framework [of Glissant], there is indeed no contradiction between the permanent centrality of the African-American experience in the creation and development of jazz and its universalization: it is precisely because it has grown from the particular history of slavery and racism in the United

Universal or Specific Creolization?
ethical scope can be found in the play between the imposition of the strength of a category and its reception. In the dark spaces of domination and oppression, “humanities were powerfully obstinate,” Glissant tells us, to create what he calls the “mode of Relation,” a baroque speech inspired by all of the possible speeches (Glissant 1990, 79–89). These composite cultures, the cultures of “creolization” and of “Relation” that overcame dehumanizing imprisonment learn the tolerant possibility of “the other as inferant,” in the conjunction of “all the histories …, none of which can claim absolute legitimacy” (Glissant 1996, 63). Glissant’s universality is not one that would be common to humanity but a visionary, projective one that one would want to see emerge “to practice a new approach to the spiritual dimension of humanities” and participate in “the recomposition of the mental landscape of these humanities today” (Glissant 1996, 17). And if this experience of an unprecedented humanism comes from within the societies that resulted from slavery, then it is more prosaically up to the researcher to take up the task of locating its empirical equivalencies.

The Universal in Question

With the confusion of globalization leading us to the confusion between what comes from the dissemination of “models” and what is at the shared foundation of humanity, and the confusion of ethics bringing us deep into the idea of a creolization of which the singularity would be to open onto the world and connect humanities, the question of the universal definitively remains in its entirety. Is not the problem then one of knowing what the “universal” is and what it could mean for the development of a theory of creolization? Necessarily going against current literature that is too enamored with rejecting—at least in performative terms—any form of general theoretical statement, I will return to an older body of literature and even associate it with references considered to have surpassed or even contradicted it, hoping, somewhat like Roger Chartier (1998) to approach the “edge of the cliff” where heteronomic logics come together. Thus the notion of “invariant” seems to be worth recovering to help define the relevant area of the universal. It immediately invokes Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism and the search for what, in the diversity of social arrangements, allows “the invariant behind variability” to appear (Pouillon 2002, 11). This is the invariance that Claude Lévi-Strauss took to be “universal” in what it revealed of modes of intellection shared by human societies in the creation of meaning assigned to the world, allowing, as Maurice Godelier writes, “to pass from the unity of a multiplicity [indifferentiation] to the diversity of an identity” (Godelier 1973, 284). The invariance or the universality we face in this anthropological tradition is that of the revelation of what we may call a “mechanics of meaning.” Totemism Today (Lévi-Strauss 1980) continues to offer a definite way into understanding the procedures of separation and distinction through which sense is capable of emerging.

States … that it got its potential to become universal that it was accepted and appropriated in many regions of the world where it has been, and is still, incessantly being transformed” (Martin 2008, 110).
Of course, human universality cannot be reduced to the modalities of creation of meaning, but they certainly form the crux from which regimes of symbolization of human practices, their legitimation, and their competition for the powerful mastery of the tools of representation are deployed. The common ground the universal invariance of creolization shares with the identification of these procedures of making sense can be understood in relation to the characteristic Lévi-Strauss himself identified and relates to the necessary dissociation/multiplication within “communities” that may be seen as more isolated or sealed. These “communities” find the means to giving meaning to their identities by having recourse to the diversity that they create, as well as in establishing the relationship between their differentiated components: “We should not, therefore, be tempted to a piece-meal study of the diversity of human cultures, for that diversity depends less on the isolation of the various groups than on the relations between them” (Lévi-Strauss 1961, 17). If creolization is seen as putting dissociated groups into relation, it takes its universality from the invariant principle at the foundation of all human societies: the necessary creation of significant, separate, and connected units instituting the social relationship. In other words, the collision of cultural forms is inherent to social experience, because it cannot forego the resources of differentiation/diversification to make the world significant, a procedure that necessarily involves connection and interpenetration.

Once integrated into this theoretical arrangement, creolization can seem to be a part of what I called above a “mechanics of meaning,” but which does not reveal any of this meaning, only the ways for it to appear. The harshest critiques of Lévi-Strauss have addressed this point, under the severe reproach of reducing the imagination to the invariance of schemas of opposition (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 288–290), of “considering meaning as a simple ‘result’ of the difference of signs” (Castoriadis 1975, 194). Yet is it not possible precisely to bypass this debate by considering the procedures through which symbolic thought is capable of functioning as what they are, in other words, as procedures that leave the question of their use completely open? Cultural inventiveness is in all probability situated in the art of using the “mechanics of meaning” and to diversify the meaning of the world through it. From this point of view, no text critical of structuralism—at least among those studied—appears to present a particularly convincing case that it is technically possible to make sense of the world other than through recourse to the principle of dissociation which necessarily mobilizes a use of the qualifying limit. On the condition of being extended to every system of signs, the way opened by Noam Chomsky offers a way of implementing the awaited bypassing and to rediscover a subject creator of meaning, when the linguist asserts that “[l]anguage provides finite means but infinite possibilities of expression … The finitely specifiable form of each language … underlying

18. See on this point the very honest conclusion of the critical article addressed by Dany-Robert Dufour (1989) to structuralism, in which he announces his use of “binary” in developing his own concepts, as if it could not be otherwise.
all of the individual manifestations, which are potentially infinite in number”. (Chomsky 1969, 55). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the notion of “bricolage,” as an assemblage of heterogeneous materials, is borrowed from Lévi-Strauss (1962) to describe—for the most famous representatives of creolity such as Raphaël Con fant—the Caribbean cultural “maelstrom,” which could mean that even in the heart of structuralist literature, the seeds for surpassing it are already present.

Upon close examination, the universality of creolization, conceived of as the very principle of human experience, does not tell us much about the social imagination it inhabits. Once recognized as common or variable, it is capable of being expressed in the generalizing vocabulary it is known for to designate relationships, contacts, migrations, changes, intermingling, mixtures, diversity, and pluralities, and so forth. Yet, finally, nothing of the meaning itself reaches us, only the “mechanisms” or the “processes” through which it passes and constructs itself, which Ulf Hannerz sensed when he asserted that what counts in the process of creolization are the “local interpretations, the local contexts of signification” (Hannerz 1996, 9). For this reason, it is difficult to take the permeability of cultures as a sort of unsurmountable finality because it cannot predict the production of meaning that comes from placing social systems into relation with each other. If creolization only remains at the level of postulating an irrefutable dynamic, if it dismisses singular symbolic production, then it “immobilizes” social edifices in a permanent movement and empties them of all other possibilities, including the possibility of tending towards the renewal of their constituents, of working on the changes that concern them in the direction of a search for stability. The need for a return to the directions that societies give themselves did not escape Appadurai (Appadurai 2001, 247–259), despite the polarization of the phenomena of deterritorialization and dispersion, when he calls for paying more attention to “the production of localities,” always there to indicate, as an echo of Georges Balandier (Balandier 1981), that this production is never a given but the result of “knowing how to produce and reproduce” a socialized space-time under conditions of permanent uncertainty.

We must therefore return to the context where the production of meaning itself is developed to reach, not the invariance of dynamic principles of placing cultures into a relationship which rapidly drains the question of societal imagination, but the singularity of elaborations of meaning. Once put back in context, that of the societies of the New World, the contribution of creolization to anthropological knowledge becomes clearer.

19. This is not the place to delve deeper into this theoretical discussion, but the idea of “possibilities of infinite expression,” if it is pertinent, can only be that way after confrontation with the analyses of Michel Foucault (1969, 1971). He saw a limitation in the “infinite number” of enunciatory performances in the fact that the utterances belong to “discourses” that govern, control, and regulate their existence.

20. “In the Caribbean, mixture occurs in the mode of diffraction, heterogeneity, and ‘cultural bricolage’ in the sense of Lévi-Strauss” (Confiant, cited in Knepper 2006, 72).
Singular Creolization or the Invention of a New Relationship to Power

At the end of this necessarily fragmentary panorama of the different definitions and theoretical questions developed in relation to creolization, we must now risk taking a position based on what has been studied thus far. Following several authors, I will argue for a contextualization of cultural dynamics, in the manner of Sindey Mintz and Richard Price (Mintz and Price 1992), whose essay, as Richard Price still claims today (Price 2011), is a vibrant call for historicization and the careful exploration of the sociohistorical characteristics at work in creole societies. Reestablishing the “singularity” of creolization in the New World means first being situated within the matrix of plantation societies to measure the scale of its resonance in the social constructs that issued from it.21

There are converging points of view among critics in calling for the reestablishment of connections between the “labile identity” that creolization is supposed to present and the conditions of its formation, conditions which could also contradict the weight given to the creole world. They deplore the omission of a description that pays attention to concrete history in which the models of creolization developed (Trouillot 1998, 9) and, with it, the loss of meaning that comes from side-lining processes of domination and subordination within a conception where “métissage” is presented alongside its own very conflictual reality. This is what Nigel Bolland articulates (Bolland 2002, 37) when saying that the theoretical issue for creolization can be found in the rejection of a dualism that places the violence of colonial domination on one side and the responses of the “creole” world on the other. The first and the second are connected together to form two aspects of a single system. Bolland finds this tendency to isolate creole dynamics from the conflicts that pass through it in Brathwaite’s work (Brathwaite 1971, 228–232) when he describes the Jamaican jonkonnu22—which he only suggests in passing is a dramatization of slave society—as characterized by its mixed, Euro-creole, or Afro-creole influences. For Bolland (Bolland 2002, 36), however, the constant satire in the jonkonnu should retain our attention, in that it expresses significant political acts fed by the conflicts in creole society as a whole. On this point, studies of the carnival practices in the French Caribbean (Giraud 1999; Mulot 2003) would have no difficulty in convincing Bolland of the interest they have in political and identity significations in societies seen through their splits, societies where, in the carnival and elsewhere, work is done to “banish the demons of dispossession and propose the definition of a new form of being Guadeloupian” (Mulot 2003, 120). In the same way, Raquel Romberg’s study

21. For a discussion of the notion of singularity applied to historical events, see Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 2000, 432–436), who makes the “citizen” the mediator between the judge and the historian—“one-third” of historical memory—to adjudicate on the equity of the incomparability of an event.
22. Jonkonnu refers to processions during the Christmas season where masked participants dance in the streets. It is often compared to a form of carnival, although its African origin seems to be more strongly established. See on this point Richard Burton (Burton 1997, 65–83).
Romberg (2005) dedicated to the Porto Rican brujería calls for a separation from conceptions where creative mixing and the “dialogue between cultures” are lauded at the expense of the weight of conflicts have had in the relationship that has historically structured creole societies, when preeminence is only given to colonial power and its imposed discipline over the colonized (Romberg 2005, 191). The matrix of plantation societies clearly refers back to these institutions that possess “the systems of formalized, codified, and objectified categorization” spoken of by Rogers Brubaker, and which have “the power to name, identify, categorize, and state what is what and who is who” (Brubaker 2001, 75). For this reason, Romberg distances herself from any theoretical romanticism and uses the metaphor of “religious piracy” for the brujería to find in these religious practices as much fascination and desire for the attributes of colonial power as there is fear and opposition. Imitating these same attributes, borrowing them illicitly, pirating them, and using them in non-canonical ways in parallel worship are all ways to interpret a complex relationship between the center and the margins, one that Romberg sees as translated more in terms of “partnership” and “mutual dependence” than rebellious autonomy (Romberg 2005, 199, 203, 210). Reestablishing connections with the places of power no longer seems capable here of accommodating a vision of creolization “soaring” in the spheres of a multiplicity free of hierarchies, power relations, rejection, and conflicting adaptations.

The singularity of creolization can first be found there, in a context of eminently violent relationships where an unprecedented system is established wherein the hierarchy of races introduces the dehumanization of entire swaths of societies driven by their economic aims: the reduction of a human being to “personal property,” as stated in the Code noir of the former French colonies which reflected the physical logic of the whip in the institutional symbolism of the colonial imagination, an objectivized, inculcated, interiorized, and subjectivized symbolism to ensure that blacks unavoidably occupied the place they were given.

The criticism addressed to some authors of creolization still needs to be clarified, since among those I have mentioned, none distance themselves from this irrefutable historical reality and its consequences: “harrowing process” for Nettleford (1978); “dispossession,” “rupture,” “wrenching” for Glissant (1981); “dehumanizing institution” for Brathwaite (1971); “yoke” of history for the authors of the Éloge (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Conffiant, 1993); “mortal fear of the sovereign master” for Gilroy (1993); “traumatic rupture,” “distortion of life,” and “historic violence” for Hall (1995), and so forth. There is therefore no way to speak of “decontextualized” approaches. On the contrary, all of them refer clearly to the creole singularity of the New World issuing from the complete nature of the institutional and ideological apparatuses that constrict it. Some authors, despite their intense valorization of hybridity, even warn strongly that “it is impossible to approach Caribbean culture without understanding the way it was continually...

23. Magical healing practices and intercession with spirits, with a significant presence of Catholic religious symbols.

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inscribed by questions of power” (Hall 1995, 7). However, detachment from this context seems to occur as soon as the shift to an atemporal, deterritorialized creolization appears, with a single contingency and placed both beyond the coercive pressures of the social order and the necessities required by any process of giving meaning to the social relationship. What needs to be defined are “cultural productions.” From these, we have seen that ethics only wanted to retain unending processes and permanent incompletions. This lead to the characteristic back-and-forth in the authors we have examined, like a tension between the desire to describe the outcomes or avowed social forms, even though they are always subject to the dynamics inherent in the social relationship, and the desire to extract cultural components from the horrible determinations of the slavery matrix. Such a creolization thus becomes hesitant, inhabited in turn by the fluidity of constantly nomadic thought, by the capability to invent new institutions, and by the loss of an outside compensated by the vertiginous movement of métissage.

It would be misleading to claim to propose an interpretation that is free of the intentions of its author. These limits, which call for a necessary critical viewpoint, frame the perspective that I would like to present and that aims to summarize the results of research presented elsewhere,24 where distance is taken from Édouard Glissant’s perspective, which nonetheless does not take away from the richness that it continues to provide. While the notion of creolization has to be retained to describe cultural manifestations formed in the crucible of plantation societies, it is not to discover within it a logic of the “Diverse” conceived of as “a limitless métissage with multiple elements and unpredictable outcomes” (Glissant 1990, 46). In a previous text (Chivallon 2005), I attempted to question the idea of an “absence of limits” in the Caribbean universe which, when confronted with a few simple anthropological propositions, reaches an impasse, since any social relationship, to exist, presupposes that it is represented. In other words, without the demand of the “trial of representation,” without a meaning assigned to the relationship, the relationship itself is not able to accede to reality. Assigning meaning supposes the necessary passage through forms of codification, the most obvious being language, which makes formal finitude present. Stuart Hall reveals this limit better than any other, a limit that could contradict the infinitude of the hybridity he postulates: “Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time” (Hall 1994b, 257). And if I were to retain only one major theoretical influence to understand the impossibility of the formal infinitude required by establishing a relationship, I would turn to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1986) to understand that social construction consists of a continual exteriorization of subjectivities. Systems of signs “objectivize” a mental universe, making it accessible to others and, in so doing,

24. In the framework of this article, I can only give a broad impression of the interpretations that inspired this research. For a more detailed approach with empirical contributions, see the references to my works in the bibliography.
making intersubjectivity, the relationship between the self and others, possible (Berger and Luckman 1986). More or less sedimentation is the corollary of the code, because it cannot be conceived of ephemerally, otherwise the social relationship itself would be lost in its impermanence. The limits of the code that circumscribes, separates, designates, names, and finally makes common an intelligibility of the world is therefore irremediably opposed to the vision of the social world as endlessly fluid. It breaks with the logic of infinitude.

No more than any other culture, creole cultures cannot escape this need to rely on systems of “coding” of relationships, which has led to a number of difficulties for some authors who, when faced with the evidence of the presence of these systems in hardened formulations of identity, have found ways, thanks to a particular rhetoric, to “hide” these incompatible aspects with a theory of chaos or dilution of identity.25 Yet if the finitude of the tools of representation is imposed, what meanings allow these same representations to be seen? Have we not previously seen a creative possibility in the use of these same tools? Once the vision of an unlimited fluidity incapable of giving body to relationships situated in space and time is set aside, the alternative of diversity remains to be found in the interaction of the plurality of collective orientations that all rely on codifications, but find in their simultaneous presence the means to avoid a unified and hierarchized “norm.” This is the type of interpretation that I think can be developed for Caribbean cultural universes, when they are presented in a proliferation of registers of identification, particularly apparent in the fields of religion, but also in other sectors of social life like family organization or the narrative formats of memorials (Chivallon 2002; 2004). If no adherence seems to be definitively set in stone, it is not because of an absence of frameworks destined to prefigure them. Instead, it is due to the overabundance of frameworks that disseminate the normative center, avoid forming a solid core of identity definition, and finish by evading power, the very power that intimate knowledge of the ravages it causes can be said to have given rise to this critical disposition, one that it always watchful of any coercive arrangement. This particular construct—which has made some think of forms of an “a-centered community,” or an “absence of community meta-narrative” which is filled with a “plurality of little narratives”—can be encountered in almost paroxysmal formulations, like the Jamaican Rastafari movement, which has taken the explanation of this destabilization of power to an almost unequaled level by making the individual the place of sovereign authority and the collective only the aggregation, connected or not, of these “I” (Chivallon 2004). However, the traces of this aspiration to hold the power of any group at a distance can also be found in much more conventional collectives, like those seen in the world of Martinican peasants. Establishing systems of regulation related to the reproduction of property are combined in this case with the desire not to

25. On this point, see the analysis of two works that I proposed in Christine Chivallon (1996, 2005, and 2008) where the confusion caused by antinomic cultural orientations of the logic of constant opening to diversity can be seen: the territorialization of the Martinican peasantry by Chamoiseau (1992); and Black nationalism in Gilroy (1993).
bind the individual in an excess of constraints and to allow a collective “family-heritage” entity to be established—when successional division arrives at its end—through the non-division of land to preserve, paradoxically, the individual right of each person to have access to it more successfully (Chivallon 1998). Without reaching the same conclusions, I will follow Francis Affergan (2006) here on fact that the question Caribbean societies pose is one of the “norm,” not to indicate that access to it is prohibited, as the anthropologist suggests, but to confirm that the constant play it occasions is able, in the plurality of systems of meaning developed, to contravene the all-powerfulness that would allow “one” system to be established and discipline the social body as a whole.

This perspective connects with or draws on, even at a distance, other approaches where “counter” strikes a sharp refrain: “counterculture of modernity” (Gilroy 1993), culture of the “counter-plantation” (Dahomay 2000), “counter-hegemonic” culture (Baron and Cara 2003), “system of counter-values” (Chamoiseau, cited in Knepper 2006), to only mention some of the most explicit expressions of this generality imposed through several types of writing that place a critical relationship with power at the center of collective construction. In his study of “power” in the “Afro-creole” world of the Caribbean, Richard Burton (1997) refers to Michel de Certeau and the distinction he made between “opposition” and “resistance,” the first taking place from the inside of a system with concepts and weapons of contestation derived from it and the second taking the tools for its rebellion from outside the system (Burton 1997, 6–7). Richard Burton turns to “opposition” to describe the omnipresence of practices destined to destabilize colonial power in the Caribbean but which, with a few, rare exceptions (the revolution of Saint-Domingue), are not part of the “resistance” as capable of detaching themselves from the power they are contesting. Examining the diverse cultural spheres in turn, with notably the peasant systems, the *Jonkonnu*, Afro-Christian religions, and Rastafarianism in Jamaica, or with carnival in Trinidad and Voodoo in Haiti, the author concludes with the existence of Caribbean cultures in “perpetual rebelliousness,” but “with an inability to effect lasting changes in the structures of power it rebels against.” The radicalism and utopianism carried by the cultural forms he describes thus appear to be “less expressions of sociopolitical resistance than substitutes for it: it is as though West Indians have preferred to keep their radicalism in the cultural domain, where it can neither really threaten the power structure, nor bring injury on them while permitting them to pursue pragmatic oppositional ends day by day” (Burton 1997, 263–265).

26. For a perspective on this work, see Christine Chivallon (2004), in particular parts 2 and 3.
27. Raquel Romberg (2005) also uses the work of Michel de Certeau, but the texts where he develops his perspective on “ruses” as opposed to “strategies.” This distinction, as applied by Romberg, seems less expedient that the one used by Richard Burton (1997) to the extent that she seems to forget the fact that the production of ruses, for de Certeau, is seen as “dispersed,” “silent,” and “almost invisible because it does not indicate itself with its own productions” (de Certeau 1990, XXXVII). With Burton’s approach (Burton 1997, 94), on the contrary, we obtain cultural productions that find the solidity they merit, such as the ones formed in the Jamaican peasant milieu, presented as “consolidated as a cultural system.”
One could certainly debate this way of approaching “oppositions” to assert even more forcefully the threats they have continually brought to bear on colonial or state power and on the actors themselves, agents of these “rebellious” formulations, which Richard Burton also concedes when speaking of “serious threats” expressed at one time or another (Burton 1997, 263). More interesting, however, is the question that this perspective raises on power maintained in an identical way, which conceals much more than a statement of impotence. It may come closer to translating the way that the relationship to power is seen in the Caribbean universes. The dissociation of politics and culture crosses several texts where it is difficult to establish correspondences between the two domains of “culture” and “politics.” If we understand the latter as the capacity to govern the former, or as the set of symbolic and institutional processes that aim to master the collective project and its continuation, it must be noted that Caribbean creole societies epitomize the difficult harmonization between the political order and the projects it is supposed to master. This is the point of view developed, among others, by the Guadeloupean philosopher Jacky Dahomay (2000). If politics is seen as the establishment of a “common world,” it must be understood that this elaboration does not take place in the case of the Caribbean. Jacky Dahomay speaks of the culture created by the slaves as a “reactive culture” or as an “essentially polemical culture developed in a space already regulated by politics,” cultures within which there are traces of arrangements proper to societies without a state, and even “against the state” with “a strong impulse for equality, and the constant refusal of any accumulation”: a “counter-plantation culture” (Dahomay 2000, 105). The divorce of the political and the cultural would be the basis for the paradoxical trajectories that have made Haiti into a “non-republic”—where the state has not been able to adapt to this tendency against the formation of a state—and the French Caribbean into the place of a republic without sovereignty, to the extent that assimilation to the French republican set-up would satisfy the demand for equality of citizenship without achieving a complete development of public space as a common good (Dahomay 2000, 108–109).

The absence of the institutionalization of the public domain that Jacky Dahomay identifies and even deplors, and which echoes an older “running away of institutions,” just like the refuge of critical radicalism in the cultural domain that Richard Burton observes, are they not the most obvious expression of the dynamics of these cultures, which is precisely not to create the structures of a common order and leave it in a sphere that it cannot leave, that is, the instituted place of politics, or in other words the one where the ordering power is necessarily active and the object of critical suspicion and refusal? What takes place in the so-called “cultural” sphere is inscribed in a completely different dimension,

28. Translator’s note: The original expression is “marronnage des institutions.”
the dimension of arrangements where are continually negociated the means to hinder governance through making plural registers of identity available which make authority present everywhere at once and in fact nowhere. The “dilution” that creolization might signify is not a dilution of identities but of power close to those who are subject to it. In this sense, creolization, as a singular cultural experience constrained by the matrix of slave plantations, can be seen as the invention of a new relationship to power. A significant invention of a “mode of being” or a “regime of historicity as a modality for self-consciousness” (Hartog 2003, 19), nourished by what Édouard Glissant recognized as “a conscience of consciousness” (Glissant 1981, 258). The invention of a “mode of thought,” as Serge Gruzinski suggests as well (Gruzinski 1999, 43), with a “vitality” and unprecedented character that draw on the “aptitude to transform and critique” the heritage of colonization in the New World.

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*Universal or Specific Creolization?*
Christine Chivallon, *Universal or Specific Creolization? Perspectives from the New World.* — A review of texts on creolization, revealing that this notion has quite different contents, opens our discussion in this article. It first shows that the word “creole,” seemingly a semantic category under métissage, can be split into four major fields of meaning. The article then examines the problematic of universality to question the relevance of using a specific qualification among conceptions that tend to project creolization into a universe of meaning released from the restrictions of membership, localization, and particularism. It concludes with the suggestion that creolization, as a qualification of cultural formations in the New World, be understood according to its specific context. Creolization, in the same way that it cannot be removed from requirements linked to the construction of social relations, does not escape from the historical matrix from whence it draws its characteristics. These characteristics prove to be decisive for producing cultural forms supplied at a profound level by their special relation to politics, which give way to precise constructions capable of undermining the scope of coercion exercised by authorities.

Christine Chivallon, *Créolisation universelle ou singulière? Perspectives depuis le Nouveau Monde.* — À partir d’une revue de textes ayant donné à la créolisation des contenus divers, cet article s’attache à discuter cette notion. Il montre d’abord que le terme, sous une apparente généralité sémantique placée sous le signe du métissage, se décline en quatre domaines de signification majeurs. Il s’attache ensuite à la problématique de l’universel pour interroger la pertinence du recours à une qualification singulière au sein de conceptions portées à projeter la créolisation dans un univers de sens dégagé des contraintes de l’appartenance, de la localisation et du particularisme. Il abouit enfin sur des propositions destinées à présenter une interprétation où la créolisation, en tant que qualifiante des formations culturelles du Nouveau Monde, est saisie au travers de la singularité de son contexte. Pas plus qu’elle n’est soustraite aux exigences propres à la construction de la relation sociale, la créolisation n’échappe à la matrice historique d’où elle puisse ses caractéristiques. Celles-ci apparaissent décisives dans la production de formes culturelles profondément irriguées par un rapport particulier au politique donnant lieu à des agencements spécifiques aptes à déjouer la portée coercitive du pouvoir.