

Creolizing the Nation

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Kris F. Sealey



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In loving memory of Eli Nathan Sealey, our little Superman

(February 2–11, 2019)

And for Ishmael Curtis-Terence, a radiant child

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Creolizing the Nation

INTRODUCTION

The seeds of this book were planted in my reading (and ultimately my review) of Mike Monahan's work on the creolizing subject.¹ In that work, Monahan juxtaposes his conception of a creolizing subject against a subject of purity—one for whom “an inner coherence or wholeness . . . is pitted over against an external world (the *object* of her contemplation, knowledge and action).”² The creolizing subject, on the other hand, is one who understands experience in terms of ambiguity, openness, and dynamic articulations of borders across which self relates to other. In 2013, Monahan's work inspired me to offer speculations in response to his work, which would (some six years later) culminate in this book. Hence, I'd like to quote my 2013 speculations at length here: “Perhaps the creolizing subject is positioned to radically reconceptualize the workings of borders, and thus generate what would be an anti-racist nationalism. Beyond a dualistic logic of purity, borders are not ‘all or nothing,’ which means that they can be sufficiently dynamic as to condition a phenomenology of permeability. In this regard, the creolizing nationalist would understand the significance of national borders for the ex-colony's pursuit of political and economic autonomy, but would also understand that such borders (and the resulting practices that determine the conditions under which crossing and inclusion is permitted) remain open to perpetual scrutiny.”³

I've come to formulate this orientation—of ambiguously constituted borders that might be called into question by the efficacy with which they support plural conceptions of freedom—as one that creolizes the nation. That is to say, under the conceptual tools offered by creolization, the ontological formulations of the modern nation-form shift so as to offer conceptions of community, the subject, and relationality that can alternatively ground collective national life. Through creolizing nation-ness in this way, I offer speculative experimentations with the meaning of subjectivity and relationality, experimentations that this book will highlight as already unfolding in the real-time histories of societies that are named “creole.” I use Édouard Glissant's reading of these creolizing social imaginaries to argue that, in bringing frames of creolization to bear on nation-ness, we might begin to at least grapple with the possibility of decolonial (more liberatory) determinations of national ontolo-

gies and to think generatively about how such ontologies can make room for plural articulations of the human.

To say this otherwise, I use creolization to open up and revisit the presumed finality of coloniality's violence, the terms of which are codified in standard conceptions of the nation. I read these terms—difference-as-allergy, community-as-static, and borders-as-closed—through the lens of creolization in order to trouble the claim that they offer the only possible cornerstones for determining the identity of the subject and the constitution of community. Hence, in creolizing the nation, I have in mind the implications of those everyday disruptive and resistive practices that scholars like Glissant foreground in their analyses of creole societies. At the level of the everyday, these creolizing performances jostle the colonial and neocolonial totalities that make for the impossibility of free black life (or, indeed, that code black life as dispensable). In so doing, these performances generate cracks in the dominant codes out of which other possibilities might emerge.⁴

The possibility of disrupting such a totalizing ontology, I argue, lives in creolization's articulations of alternative ways of subjectivity, relationality, and, ultimately, community. These creolizing practices do not extend their disruptions to the level of state mechanisms. Rather, they undermine the veracity of those mainstream structures from below, producing imaginaries and discursive practices that produce socialities not completely accounted for by that mainstream. Michaeline Crichlow's language of "jostling" appears often in my bringing together creolization and the nation-form, since it provides an apt metaphor for what I find most productive in using creolizing compartments at the level of the everyday as an argument for reorienting our conception of the nation.⁵ In the act of jostling, one imagines a level of disruption that doesn't completely *topple* the object being disrupted, but nevertheless forces the object to reckon with the jostling effect (with the *subject* from whom that jostling effect is generated). The claim of my analysis is that, jostled by creolizing compartments, the ontologies that support the mechanics of national formation are no longer *unaffected* by creolization's "otherwise."

Hence, from the level of the everyday, practices that are creolizing invite us to think imaginatively about what it might mean to live with and in the nation-form differently, what it might mean to enact Frantz Fanon's "leap," so that invention might enter into national collective existence.⁶ So although the overall effect of creolizing the nation is not to undo the matrices of power that stitch together the governmentality of the state, I do want to argue that, through creolization, the organizing coloniality of that power does not have the last word. This book works to demonstrate this, first by offering the conceptions of subject, community, and relationality that Glissant develops out of the frame of creolization; then by bringing these concepts into critical conversation with key intellectual orientations in the Latina feminist tradition; and, finally, by offering Glissant's creolizing poetics as potential discursive

support for Fanon's political demand for a decolonial orientation of nation-ness. Across these three sections, I aim to show that, so long as we can imagine (as creolization positions us to) community and relationality in ways not coded for by logics that determine human life as dispensable—even if these imaginative practices happen through networks *below* and not at the level of mainstream political structures—coloniality is robbed of the last word. More significantly, these imaginative practices mean that certain xenophobic constructions of nation-ness do not exhaust what collective national life might be.

For the most part, the adoption of creolization as a mode of theory preserves the originary usage of the term as one that reckons with emergences that result from contact among different cultural and symbolic orientations. There can be the creolization *of* theory, capturing the epistemological frameworks that emerge when radically different modes of knowledge come into relation to generate a new and alternative set of methodologies. There can be the creolization of language, as what explains much of the linguistic modalities in French Caribbean and Spanish Caribbean islands as their inhabitants brought together (out of necessity) European, African, and indigenous tongues in the generation of a singularly new creole mode of speech. To this end, the phenomenon of creolization broadly captures contact and relationality among differences, the trajectory of which does not lead to a reduction of those differences in the name of a higher totality. Rather, creolization is understood specifically as the bringing into relation differences *as such*.

To return to its original context in the Caribbean outposts of colonial empires, contact of this kind could not have happened without the Middle Passage and its ensuing plantation economies. As Glissant tells us (and scholars of creolization are sure to emphasize), this means that the consequences of creolization are grounded in a very particular history. *What* happened to make these creole outposts emerge is constitutive to their lifeworlds being named as creole. This constitutive relationship between the history of creolizing societies and the meaning of creolization (its bearing on the arrangements of life in those societies) will be a key part of this book's analysis. But because these are histories of violent rupture, they position both creolizing identities and social practices of creolization as (somewhat unavoidable) deviations from the single and unbroken lineage narratives that figure at the center of standard accounts of the nation-form. Compositeness and the blurring (or making ambiguous) of borders mark the products of creolization, a process that calls into question the value of pure origins, faithfulness to such origins, and the stasis needed for the authentic replication of origins, in terms of both the identity of the creolizing subject and the community constituted out of creolization. It is on these counts that I argue for using processes of creolization (in particular, their reimagined conceptions of belonging, belonging-with, and the meaning of difference in collective life) to determine a path to alternative conceptions of the nation-form.⁷

Stakes

Stakes are involved in my query, so I am compelled to lay them bare. I return to a single experience that began my ruminations on nationhood, citizenship, and migration. I was hours away from giving birth to my first child, a glorious little boy I call Isaiah. For reasons too weighty to detail, July 3, 2005, found me as an international student in the United States, in between immigration statuses, with no work authorization and no health insurance. The actual process of giving birth via cesarean section was a doped-up blur, save for the distinct memory of my son's first cry. In between morphine drips that silenced the throbs of the fresh incision out of which Isaiah emerged into the world, I opened my eyes to a pretty decent maternity recovery room. In those first moments (minutes, hours, it remains difficult to gauge), I didn't know where my baby was. I only assumed that he was receiving the best neonatal care that the state of Florida could provide.

It turned out that I was right. The gamut of usual tests were run on him, and, with the exception of his bilirubin count, he passed them all with flying colors. Isaiah was diagnosed with jaundice, so what looked like a crossover between an incubator and a miniature tanning bed became a permanent fixture in my comfortable recovery room. He spent hours under the contraption's phototherapy lights. Even though this meant he couldn't be in my arms, I garnered comfort from knowing that this was the medical care he needed, and that no expense was being spared to turn his yellow underglow brown, to transform him into a thriving little human being.

It wasn't until day two, when another crossover entered the room—a social worker who was also an immigration adviser—that the cost of all this state-of-the-art medical care became a question. For my son (I was told), all costs were being covered by Florida's Medicaid program. His U.S. citizenship entitled him to this coverage, which meant that everything, from his emergence through (what was by then) the painful C-incision, to his last heel-prick, was paid for by U.S. tax dollars, the tax dollars of his fellow community members.

And here is where, to my mind, things became weirdly aporetic, in a way that such postcolonial situations—like Isaiah's birth out of an immigrant mother and into the racialized metrics of US citizenship—always are. The C-opening that was performed on my body would not (could not) be covered by Medicaid. The room that I healed in for three days, as I established breastfeeding amid Isaiah's phototherapy treatment, would not (could not) be covered by Medicaid. The rounds of morphine dripping into my body, to dull the pain of the incision through which my little U.S. citizen entered the world, would not (could not) be covered by Medicaid. So in sum, my health and well-being, unavoidably necessary for the health and well-being of the baby citizen, was an obligation outside the boundaries of the community of which that baby citizen was now a part. And, as a matter of financial transactions, this comes as no surprise. But there is also that other matter of the

logics of nation-ness and citizenship—how it frames belonging, relationality, ethicality, the possibility of full humanity. Distended by such logics was what was supposed to be a quite natural relationship between mother and child (extension of mother *into* child) but, instead, turned into a most naturalized postcolonial situation, whereby the commitment to stasis in our border constructions strain under the complexities of traveling subjects and their global entanglements. For Isaiah's birth, the C-cut of my incision literally functioned as the border across which his legal entitlements and self-formation became disassembled from mine, *as* it simultaneously conditioned the fundamental grounds of his self-formation. A postcolonial situation indeed—where the nation-form's boundaries between self and other arrange around it the meanings of fecundity, family, and the possibility of community.

This only meant that I got the bill from Coral Springs Medical Center around the time Isaiah turned one month old. The amount reflected all the wonderful care and treatment I received during those three days in my comfortable recovery room. But it also reflected what I can only now see as the liminal point of constitutions of citizenship and belonging, of how the circulation of bodies across a globe jostles the core of such constitutions. If a nation is to take on the charge of providing its citizens with the ingredients for well-being, what comes of that charge when one of those ingredients is the well-being of a citizen's so-called alien parents? What does it mean to prioritize neonatal thriving, when the conditions for that thriving (like, for instance, the health of the infant's mother) surpass the boundaries of obligation determined through the narrative of national belonging? In a similar vein, what does it mean to promise the rights and privileges of citizenship to U.S.-born children while at the same time (at best) remaining indifferent to or (at worst) undermining the family structures needed for those children to turn into wholesome adults?⁸

These questions are not new to mixed-status families, both in the United States and elsewhere. And to be sure, such quagmires find some resolve in immigration policy reforms that point toward fairer and more pragmatic paths to citizenship. My project will not include such policy issues in its analysis, not because they are not vitally important for addressing the crises affecting the millions of human beings who are, for varied reasons, caught in between national borders, and in between how those borders constitute their right to be full human beings. Rather, creolizing the nation seeks to make explicit the ontological frameworks out of which such crises are born in the first place, and to use creolization to develop a different kind of cultural imaginary—one in which contemporary crises like these no longer find traction. To that end, my interests lie in detailing a creolizing ontology of nation-ness, out of which configurations of identity, community, borders, and belonging can take into account the dynamism and ambiguity of postcolonial situations and thus can clear conceptual ground to think differently about difference and relationality. Hence, this book very modestly aims to open up the possibility of another

way of understanding nationalism and nation-borders, and, by extension, the very meaning of “minority” communities. Guided by Glissant’s deployment of creolization, his intersections with Latina feminists’ modes of theorization, and the relationship between Glissant’s poetics and Fanon’s politics, I detail this other way as one through which difference, sociality, and subjectivity can be understood decolonially. To be sure, this creolizing account of the nation-form would treat the experience of migratory and diasporic peoples *not* as outlier or somehow exceptional conditions, but as central to our everyday negotiations with questions of belonging and community.

Why Work within the Frame of the Nation-Form?

The organizational frame of nation-ness has, for quite some time, been pivotal to how we understand ourselves as subjects in the world and how we have arranged ourselves into politically autonomous and economically viable communities. As such, the transformation of former European colonies into independent and sovereign entities has happened within the organizational frame of nation-ness. This is an important consideration for claims in this book, and as a consequence, I hold that the work of creolizing the nation happens *within* the parameters of nation-ness. So even though the idea of the nation brings its tainted past (one that seems to have acutely reanimated itself in our present political landscape), this book works within (though, *contentiously* within) the parameters of the nation-form.

This is because to do away with the political organization it provides is to think in terms of internationalism, or, perhaps, cosmopolitanism. It is to organize ourselves not in terms of citizens of national spaces but in terms of members of a global village (of sorts). And *we are* that, given the intertwined nature of our planet. However, I am compelled by what decolonial thinkers acknowledge as the need for human liberation struggles to be attuned to the history of global power, shaped by the material and cultural pillage of colonial domination. So even though (as chapter 5’s discussion of Fanon’s work will show) human liberation has an international dimension, bringing about such a world must be grounded in localized communities, historically situated within a colonial matrix of power. As such, my critical engagement with nationalism happens in terms of the nation, so that my claims avoid the kind of ahistoricity that is blind to the geopolitical urgencies of socially located groups of people. So though nativist modulations of national belonging and allegiance are being revitalized in really problematic ways, for ends that might give at least some of us reasons to recoil from any salvaging exposition of nation-ness, I don’t do away with the idea of the nation. Rather, I pursue alternative (and decolonial) encounters with it, at the level of the everyday.

Given how this work is situated, then, I should say why the task I pursue is a creolizing of the nation, and not a nationalizing of creolization. I don’t

propose that creolized ways of being be operationalized in the institutions (the state bureaucracies) of the nation. That is to say, my claim is not that a creolizing comportment ought to be used to operationalize the economic well-being of a community, or explicitly shape modes of legislative justice, or structure the negotiation of rights in relation to other global players. Rather, *creolizing the nation* seeks to ground these more bureaucratic operations of national life in a creolizing spirit. That is to say, it is a suggestion for creolization to infuse the cultural or quotidian levels of nation-ness, so that alternative problem spaces emerge for determining how such state functions affect the lives of real people. In so doing, creolizing the nation offers alternative ontological ground to condition the possibility of encountering cultural difference, and the dynamism at the core of postcolonial sociality in ways that are conducive to free and full human life. Hence, out of this creolizing spirit I imagine a move away from a national culture that is static, nativist, protectionist, and xenophobic, toward one that acknowledges the emergent nature of its national community and that produces homely spaces absent of “claims to wholeness and finality.”⁹ Again, I don’t envision this as a move toward cosmopolitanism (or some global internationalism). Local specificity matters, but it also matters that we determine alternative ways to navigate the local specificity of the nation.



For these reasons, the book begins with a stage-setting first part, consisting of chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 offers the tropes of purity, unambiguous belonging, access to clearly defined historical pasts, and commitment to a single place or territory as those used by the nation to determine the meaning of subject formation, community, and difference. I establish the ways in which these tropes are grounded in a metaphysical prioritization of the One, which then shapes not only how difference signifies but also how we construct desires for belonging in the context of the nation. My overall goal in chapter 1 is to ultimately trouble these guiding tropes by creolization’s framework, so that we might think about contemporary global politics in more liberatory ways. Chapter 2 sets the groundwork for this by showing how, in practices of creolization, lifeworlds in the Americas have not only resisted the totalizing effects of the ordering metaphysics of the One but have also generated conditions of freedom at the level of the everyday. This chapter shows how the spatiality and temporality that order processes of creolization work to disrupt the organizational structures of the nation-form “from below” (as it were), so the task of creolizing the nation offers an account of sociality that more fully captures self-formation and community formation in the context of the nation. To be sure, I do not argue that these creolizing disruptions mark an explicit revolutionary political enterprise. But I do read them as conditioning the kinds of cultural and discursive reorientations that might set the stage

for a revolutionary and decolonial political agenda. That is to say, chapter 2 will argue that creolization gives us a frame out of which to theorize those everyday practices of sabotaging mainstream structures and systems of domination. In these practices of sabotage, there is a comportment toward plurality, movement, and ambiguity that undermines the spatiotemporal organizations of the nation-form (outlined in chapter 1).

Part 2 (encompassing chapters 3 and 4) groups together the textual resources for its task of creolizing the nation. I devote chapter 3 to Édouard Glissant's use of creolization to theorize a Caribbean imaginary that centers difference and open-endedness when it comes to an understanding of community. Glissant's work offers an ontology grounded in lived experience, which is to say, an ontology that, as existential, returns us to how truth is encountered in the everyday (in concrete, lived experience), or how it surpasses the reductive mechanisms of the metaphysics of the One. He uses the frame of creolization to make these conceptual moves, and to offer a compelling case for the political and cultural significance of such an existential (creolizing) ontology. It is out of this existential ontology that we get his conceptions of the rhizome and errantry. Chapter 3 will give an account of how these work to support Glissant's reimagined notion of Relation, and (more significantly) how they centralize the role of opacity in that notion of Relation. I show that, with opacity at the center, it is possible to think relationality outside transparency (outside a demand for a full disclosure in the singular subjects being brought into relation). I also show that, with opacity at the center, Glissant's use of creolization is as much about the "All" of the relation's totality as it is about the irreducibility of the local and the singular. This allows him to offer a reading of the Caribbean both as unique in its place in colonial history and as connected and opened up to the totality of the globe. Chapter 3 uses these Glissantian maneuvers to suggest an alternative understanding of what it means to be a nation and of the meaning of collectivities in the national context.

Through creolization's decentering of homogeneity, single territory, and linear time, I argue that we might develop conceptions of subjectivity and community that resist the essentialism and stasis of standard accounts of national identity. The book's fourth chapter turns to scholars of Latina feminism so as to foreground the ways in which their intellectual questions echo those most pivotal in the task of creolizing the nation. In so doing, I attempt to work across what, to my mind, are intellectual traditions—creolization and Latina feminism—that are often, and to our own intellectual detriment, kept apart. Chapter 4 begins from the premise that creolization asks us to reconceptualize the relation between multiplicity and oneness, so that we might, in turn, reconceptualize national community. The chapter takes this to the level of subjectivity and uses the work of María Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Mariana Ortega to center difference, flux, and ambiguity in the identity of the subject. I also trace the ways in which this account of subjectivity calls for not

only different conceptions of belonging, but also a different experience of the social. Like Glissant, these thinkers give us ways to think about difference and coherence, as well as ambiguity and home-making, together. And, in so doing, Glissant meets theorists like Ortega, Lugones, and Anzaldúa across the possibility of thinking community in a relational way, of thinking antiessentialist subjectivity without rendering the identity of the subject moot, and across the possibility of naming historical location without using history for the sake of atavism, nativism, and xenophobic closures.

Part 3 works to flesh out the political implications of these everyday reconstitutions of subject and community. Chapter 5 continues in the vein of significant intersections between creolization and Latina feminism, and develops in more detail the implications of thinking subjectivity otherwise for questions of the social, cultural, and political registers of difference. Like the preceding chapters of this book, chapter 5 avoids a flattened account of history as it brings Glissant's creolization into conversation with Latina feminism across notions of heterogeneity, antiessentialism, impurity, ambiguity. The task of creolizing the nation includes the possibility of determining ontological ground for decolonial conceptions of the subject, of difference, and, ultimately, of the culture and spirit of national community and belonging. My claim is that this requires explicit attendance to the neocolonial implications of colonial history and to the coloniality that shapes the contemporary arrangements of individual lives, communities, and their place in the world. A flattened account of history—through which the openness of antiessentialism and ambiguity's fluidness renders the human ahistorical—would therefore fail on my account of what it means to creolize the nation. Hence, an attendance to the materiality of history grounds the ways in which chapter 5 presents Lugones's conceptions of playfulness, world-travel, and curdling for dialogue with Glissant's account of relationality, opacity, and community without telos. This prepares my analysis to turn to the political work of Frantz Fanon, in thinking about how this antiteleological understanding of community might provide decolonial possibilities for national community and self-formation.

Chapter 6 brings these reimagined conceptions of subjectivity, community, and borders that Glissant's work offers (conceptions foregrounded through his intersections with that of Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Ortega) into explicitly political terrain. I bring Fanon's caution against a regressive form of nationalism into conversation with Glissant's conception of the composite community, in order to offer political ground for imagining the nation as creolizing, as an open community that supports plural modes of the human, and as orienting itself against the stasis of coloniality and toward the dynamic syncretism of a living democracy. In chapter 6, I use Fanon's own call for decolonial conceptions of national culture and identity as grounds for this reading of his work alongside Glissant. In so doing, I also attend to the important differences between Fanon and Glissant (differences that might be captured in Fanon's explicitly political engagements with anticolonialism against Glissant's more

cultural and poetic assessments of coloniality's violence). Despite these differences, however, I do highlight the ways in which Glissant's creolizing conception of community appears in the subtext of a Fanonian account of the nation, and how both thinkers similarly understand the significance of emergence and alternative productions at the level of the cultural, for imagining an alternative political future. Hence, my goal in chapter 6 is to read both critical projects—Fanon's anticolonial revolutionary politics and Glissant's anticolonial resistant poetics—as opening up new and decolonial conceptual ground out of colonialism's totalizing historical legacy. From this new ground, both thinkers develop possibilities for imagining a humanism that is radically different from the one around which colonial violence organizes itself, and for thinking the nation in terms that no longer participate in the metaphysical logics of the One.

In so doing, chapter 6 culminates the work of the preceding chapters, by posing the following question: Can our conceptions of belonging, of how (and who) we include in our communities, and how we understand our obligations and indebtedness to both belonging *and* nonbelonging others attend to the ambiguities and movements of the many postcolonial situations shaping our contemporary metropolises? I think about my own experience as an immigrant who gives birth to a U.S. citizen as an invitation to think through these ambiguities. The story of the New World is a story of moving peoples across borders, and that movement continues to shape what remains with us today, in the wake of what Sylvia Wynter calls our "1492." In that sense, experiences like mine—of families whose encounter with the nation complicates conceptions of single-root belonging and clearly demarcated geographies of home—are rather constitutive of our moment. Indeed, in the case of Isaiah's birth, we might read my nonbelonging womb as what conditions a citizenship-project that must then disavow its very condition so as to sustain itself. (How else might we read all the investments into Isaiah's thriving that stops short of investing in the well-being of his mother, precisely at the moment of his birth? How else might we read a nation-project that acknowledges the rights of the undocumented child to education, as it sustains practices that place undocumented parents in the shadows of economic and political life?) In a similar vein, it is out of a posture of nonbelonging that the entanglements of migration (shaped, no doubt, in terms of the originary violence of 1492) condition the nation-projects of the New World. That is, much like the nonlocation of my own womb in the conceptual space of Isaiah's birth, the entanglements of New World movements seem to also condition projects of New World citizenship out of a position of *not quite belonging* to those projects. Yet these entanglements are not simply there in their absence, but are there *constitutively so*, straining (haunting, even, in that "Middle Passage" kind of way) the political and cultural logics that continue to disavow them, perhaps so that these logics might sustain themselves.

In the end, creolizing the nation aims to foreground such considerations, so

that an acknowledgment of postcolonial relationalities (like the one between an immigrant's womb and a citizen-child) might clear some ground to ask, Can the political culture of the nation be uncoupled from a logic of rigid purity, and from colonial programs of crisis production, management, and control, without that divestment being the source of the nation's demise? Or, to repeat an earlier question, Can our conceptions of belonging, of how (and who) we include in our communities attend to the ambiguities and movements of the many postcolonial situations shaping our cities, our classrooms, our homes? My hope is to establish that such possibilities exist, if we begin with a properly creolizing conception of "nation." In other words, in creolizing the nation—accounting for creolizing practices at the level of the everyday, through which degrees of freedom are attained by subjects in their determinations of identity, community, and belonging—we arrive at a formulation of nation-ness that can sustain plural conceptions of the human and liberatory, decolonial futures.