

# Creolization, diaspora and carnival: living with diversity in the past and present

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As Stuart Hall remarked in the late 1990s, '[t]here has been a veritable explosion in recent years around the concept of "identity"'. This identity explosion reflected responses to challenges arising from accelerated processes of globalisation, heightened levels of international mobility, and a growing awareness of possibilities for forms of solidarity and resistance that transcend nationality or class-based allegiances. The identity epidemic has been, however, fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, there has been increasing acknowledgement that fixed identities are no longer (or never were) relevant and there is a need to acknowledge the hybrid, fluid and multi-directional nature of individual and collective identities. On the other hand, the greater contact and connectivity between diverse groups has led to a re-emergence of assertions of fixed identities and delineated markers of difference.

Over the last three years I have been working with Robin Cohen on a project entitled 'Diaspora and creolization: diverging, converging' which is, to some degree, an intervention into the identity debate. It is an attempt to bridge the gap between contemporary discussions around – and assertions of – identity in the context of recent globalisation, and historical processes of identity formation in contexts that were always, already 'hybrid'. We explore the relationship between the concepts of creolization – referring to processes of cultural exchange and the emergence of new languages and cultures – and diaspora in four different settings, namely Louisiana, Cape Verde, Mauritius and the French Antilles. While the research has been focused predominantly on historically 'Creole' societies, we have also

explored how the concept of creolization relates to contemporary social realities. More importantly, we ask: how can we use creolization beyond its original context in ways that do not dilute its meaning and undermine its conceptual depth? And finally, how do processes of creolization and diaspora, which seemingly reflect quite opposing identity ‘trajectories’, interact with each other in different spatial and temporal contexts, sometimes diverging and sometimes converging?

Just as there are those who would argue that the term diaspora loses its vigour beyond its association with the Jewish experience or instances of forced dispersal, for some creolization can only be applied to specific historical contexts of violent encounters in the New World and, more specifically still, the Caribbean. But just as the concept of diaspora has been unmoored and taken in multiple directions in ‘semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space’ (Brubacker 2005), creolization (though less extensively than diaspora) has been taken up by others as a useful term to refer more broadly to the cross-fertilisation of different cultures as they interact (Cohen 2010). Going even further, scholars like Ulf Hannerz or Edouard Glissant have used creolization as a more universal metaphor for processes of cultural globalisation, suggesting that we live in a ‘creolizing world’ (Hannerz 1987; Glissant 1990). We suggest that creolization can be usefully applied to new contexts, but only if the differential power relations within such cultural interactions and the semantic legacy of the term are acknowledged. Keeping these power dynamics in mind, we argue that the concept of creolization gives space to the possibilities for agency, creativity and resistance.

Carnival – in its many guises – represents a fascinating illustration of the interplay between creativity and resistance, between encounters in the New World and the contemporary metropole, between creolization and diaspora. Carnival enacts the creative and resistant elements of creolization: it is a moment where cultural identities merge and transform as official culture is challenged and often explicitly critiqued. Yet carnival also often retains diasporic traces, or ‘echoes’.

Carnival on the Cape Verdean island of São Vicente, for example, stages the complex history of the archipelago and its position at a crossroads between Europe, Africa and the Americas. It harks back to conquest and colonisation by the Portuguese – originating in the



*Carnival in Mindelo, São Vicente, February 2013. ©Olivia Sheringham*

Portuguese Entrudo (or ‘entrance’) to Lent which was celebrated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It also exposes practices of resistance and creativity conceived by African slaves in the exploitative and violent space of the plantation. Yet the processes of creolization which are laid bare during the Cape Verdean carnival are not purely re-enactments of past encounters. Today’s carnival is frequented as much by people residing on the island as it is by Cape Verdeans living in diaspora who play a key role in the event’s evolution and new cultural influences. It is also heavily influenced by the Brazilian carnival, owing to its widespread propagation on the TV and via other media, but also due to the fact that many Cape Verdeans either live or have lived in Brazil. Carnival in São Vicente thus represents an enactment – a creative and often spontaneous performance – of the ongoing processes of creolization and engagements with diasporic pasts and presents, in Cape Verde’s dynamic culture ‘in the making’.

The London carnival at Notting Hill, which in its modern form dates back to the 1960s, emerged in direct response to the Notting Hill ‘race riots’ of 1958 directed against Caribbean migrants. It developed among Caribbean people in Britain, not merely as entertainment but, more importantly, as an affirmation of Black culture in Britain which draws on a shared cultural heritage and says ‘We are here to stay’.

Today’s carnival in London has not only grown dramatically to attract more than a million revellers, its form and content has also

evolved to reflect London's ever-more-diverse demographic. Thus, in addition to Mas bands led by Caribbean carnival artists, who still predominate, the parades also involve multiple other ethnic groups. The notably strong presence of Brazilian Mas bands, for instance, is a consequence of the more recent burgeoning Brazilian presence in the city, also with a strong tradition of carnival and history of slavery. Brazilian groups have participated in the event for several years – with two samba groups, three 'samba-reggae' groups, and two 'maracutu' groups. Maracutu is a performance style that has its origins in the North Eastern state of Pernambuco and dates back to slavery, and combines elements of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé. The group, Maracutudu Mafua, formed in 2009, is illustrative of the evolution – and constant creolization – of Notting Hill Carnival. The group comprises over 70 performers from a diverse range of countries and while drawing on traditional maracutu forms, it also adapts and creatively reworks these as part of the carnival performance. It is a way of performing Brazilian styles to new audiences, but is also an example of how carnival evolves and adapts, engaging with diasporic pasts and presents.

What can creolization and diaspora contribute to thinking about identity in our dynamic, evermore interconnected world, a world of movement, a world of migrants, a world of 'relation' (to use Edouard Glissant's term)? A focus on creolization, and its interplay with diaspora, might compel us to think about the importance of history in the emergence of social and cultural forms and identities. It allows us to engage with the dynamic relationship between culture and space: from the space of the plantation or the island, to contemporary cities and moments such as carnival. Finally, thinking about creolization and diaspora in the past and the present forces us to recognise the socio-economic inequalities – the power play – that underlie many intercultural encounters. And this is not just a question of domination and subordination, but also necessarily encompasses creative forms of resistance. Both creolization and diaspora represent alternative expressions of identity in the context of forceful assertions of nationalism or religious certainties, and challenge the solidity of closed ethnic and racial categories. □

# References

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