

An Apology for Creoleness: The Case of Central Asia

The need for clarification based on two or three laws of normality, made us consider ourselves as abnormal beings. But what seemed to be a defect may turn out to be the indeterminacy of the new, the richness of the unknown. That is why it seems that, for the moment, full knowledge of Creoleness will be reserved for Art, for Art absolutely.

– Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant, “In Praise of Creoleness” (1989)*

1. Perspective defines the observer. Sitting on the edge of the globe, in the middle of nowhere and the midst of never, not yet knowing how to philosophize but already feeling like “spies of an unknown power,”¹ we look through a kaleidoscope’s eyepiece, seeing shards of worlds repeatedly reflected in each other (unrepeatable patterns created by repetition), and we realize that, from this vantage point, nothing seems strange to us. Neither the ghostliness of socialism nor the flesh-and-bloodiness of the free market. Neither the feel of the sea nor the sense of a continent. Neither the melancholy of the Acmeists nor the merriness of the Decadents. Neither the cosmos of the Pre-Socratics nor the chaos of the Dadaists. Neither the idealism of Don Quixote nor the pragmatism of Sancho Panza. Neither the activeness of Robinson nor the passivity of Friday. Neither monadology nor nomadology.

Like Deleuze’s wandering subject, we are repeatedly born from consumable states, repeating, “So that is us . . . So that is us . . .” The “new poor,” ready to lay our hands on anything whatsoever, disenfranchised and fatherless, we are happy to inherit any ages and cultures, and, despite our schizophrenic alienation from reality, to feel involved in some kind of provisional History, which, however, has either already ended in these parts or has not yet begun. We look for advantages in this half-life in the hinterlands, in new uninhabited places where silence reigns, because a language in which we could talk about ourselves has not yet been invented here. We wonder how this finally happens. A voice emerges amidst silence? Sense congeals from nonsense? Identity is born of imitation?

Nil novi sub luna, insists the antediluvian wisdom of the postmodern age, while ignoring both evidence of evolution and its own epistemological foundations. For isn’t knowledge as such the process of self-creation of this selfsame “new”? We study different forms of life, wanting to know what we look like. Through our spyglasses we observe the chemical weddings of nomadic monads and mobile gametes—symbolic conjunctions whereby old is transformed into new, the dry creek bed fills up with water, and the rabbit leaps out of an empty hat.

To think about this, we mix contents with the bashfulness of dilettantes, suspecting that as-yet-undescribed forms of life might be discovered in the gaps between bookshelves divided by heading. So we say something about creolization and cartography, emergence and autopoiesis, transversality and micropolitics, erratica and erotica. When we grow tired of these things, we go off to our bedrooms to make love, and every time we are amazed to discover novelty in this pastime as ancient as the world. We recall the poet’s line: *We think as we fuck*.² Apparently, reproduction of one’s kind is a job for asexual propagation, while the point of sexual procreation

* Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant, “In Praise of Creoleness,” trans. Mohamed B. Taleb Khyar, *Callaloo* 13 (1990): 892–893.

¹ Merab Mamardashvili, *Psikhologicheskaya topologiya puti* [A psychological topology of the way] (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo Russkogo Khristianskogo Gumanitarnogo Instituta, 1997).

² Essex Hemphill, “Conditions, XIII” (1986).

is, on the contrary, to reject dismal self-similarity and overcome borders? By shifting the kaleidoscope's focus from identity's stasis to transgression's dynamism, we get up the courage to look for what doesn't exist, aware that the political identity game anyway replicates the storyline about winners and losers (in other words, it is a call for war), while transgression has to do with the peacekeepingly creative destruction of this opposition, binary as a bludgeon, with a kind of gimmick: if third term does not exist, it has to be invented.

2. Territorial thinking is characteristic of all land dwellers, who guard their private domains, drilling them in search of material and symbolic treasures, killing and dying for them. But take the pelagic fish: they do not know what "their" territory is, as if there were neither Greek nor Jew, neither freeman nor slave, neither male nor female among them.

3. The diet: neither fish nor flesh.

4. Escaping from the seines of classification, inspired by the poetics of Édouard Glissant,³ we employ the concept of Creoleness in a sense beyond the context in which it arose. We intuit the movement towards realization/creolization, common to all forms of life, that lies behind it: the aura of creative reality that surrounds the existing order of things, rooted in the territorial. Getting bogged down in internal distinctions, deconstructing genealogies and counterfeiting pedigrees, we praise the wicked gods, Eros and Hermes, thanks to whose wings the world's centers and edges are bound together. Like all newcomers, we have no names, so we refer to ourselves like those who resort to tricks on the long journey home: we are Nobody. Bogeys, half-men, Creoleaks, the devil knows what, experimental creatures busy mapping the non-existent.

5. To make love, we have inevitably have to improvise. Courtly akyns and freestyle troubadours, we generate a series of improvisations and repetitions with variations. Improvisation requires a relaxed mind; without it, there is no inspiration or drive. Relaxation, in turn, requires strenuous effort: how to give up control without cowering in fear? How to let go of "your own thing" and give yourself over to elemental flows, knowing they could carry you off to places not yet suitable for life? How to learn to trust the currents the way the famous Afro-futurist Sun Ra did? After all, it seems, the music transported him to Saturn!

6. Or is it somewhere nearby?

7. Far and near are constantly reversed in the kaleidoscope's mirrors. To love one's neighbor as oneself, to love you as if you were me: doesn't this also mean pulling the trick of self-substitution—to put yourself in someone else's shoes, sing someone else's song, worry about someone else's problems? And doesn't the ancient principle of communal life oblige us to perform this trick daily, to do unto others as if we had switched places? Do these places occupied according to tickets purchased (first class, second class, etc.), which justify the prudence of self-preservation, the ambition of self-identity, and the vanity of narcissism, really exist at all? Pride in authenticity endowed from above betrays a romantic conception of the nature of the new à la Johann Herder. Originality is hardly created by the demiurgic will of a "stormy genius," even if it is the genius of some place; rather, it manifests itself slowly and gradually, like some (venereal) disease contracted in a foreign port that turns its carrier into a pariah.

We are sooner convinced by the skepticism of Hume, who argues that outgoing ideas contain nothing new compared to incoming impressions, and the creator can only imitate and recombine.⁴ In the grand scheme of things, all that the apes of the Hominidae family know how to do is ape, but this ability is worth a lot. In the end, conscientious imitation becomes something

³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740).

original. The Creole art of homeopathic magic—the cure for colonial traumas—is based on mimesis, the ability to appropriate the master’s power by imitating its symbols.⁵ We see the essence of the artist’s work in a similar way, finding its most vivid expression in the Melanesian cargo cult. Any culture is a creative imitation; any music, a set of repetitions and variations; any text, a pattern made from contextual fragments; any word, an echo, a reflection of someone else’s words.⁶

8. But what do we have of our own? Nothing, in fact. Property has always either been privatized (by the “nation”) or nationalized (“privately”), and from our point of view there is no visible difference between these forms. We do not possess land or water; we do not have a handle on the situation or ourselves. We do not even have a mastery of language. Rather, the situation is reversed: languages master us, arising in a recursive process of echoes, iterations, and reflections as a result of “loving cooperation.”⁷ Individuality and originality are an illusion, which like an alchemical miracle becomes real only when the infantile megalomania of the “unique self” is rejected. If indeed “existing means being different,”⁸ then we, the newcomers, wanting to be, want to be different as well, and want to have personality, identity, value, values, and God knows what else. In the final analysis, however, the consumer society’s new Hamlet faces a dilemma—to have or to be? Indeed, how can one be here? What is one to do?

9. What are we to do here? How are we to be? Who are “we”?

10. Deprived of roots, we are captured by flows. Flows of sounds and signs, flows of lies and shit, financial and human flows, dis- and associative flows, turning back into streams of consciousness—a technique that has been used not only in literature. It was dreamed up by Freud, the famous inventor of jazz, that method of free association that crisscrosses the physicality of therapy and speculativeness of hermeneutics, and crosslinks the transsense of art and the senselessness of science in a half-brained dream session. This method, which makes it possible to compare the incomparable, can likewise be devised today by anyone who observes the mating behavior of plants: along the roads leading away from Rome, at the world’s dusty crossroads, they flagrantly make love with the wind and the bees using the cross-pollination method. It is behavior like this that drives knowledge. Keeping in mind that not only lyric poetry but also physics is based on metaphors,⁹ we dare suggest that the strategy of juxtaposing the heterogeneous is suitable for all cognitive activity.

11. Thinking in this way, we twist the kaleidoscope again, regarding the emerging forms of life as forms of cognition, thus undermining yet another binary opposition: nature and culture.¹⁰ Here and there, the emergence of new figures happens spontaneously in the area where two or more old figures come into contact and mutual reflection. Such contact, fraught with the birth of bastards, alas, never implies equality and almost always implies violence. The history of the West, a sad history of wars, makes you think that armed seizure is the principal means of genetic exchange. The cultural concepts of Europe and Asia appeared on a single continent because of

⁵ Raquel Romberg, “Ritual Piracy: Or Creolization with an Attitude” (2005), in: *Creolization as Cultural Creativity*, ed. Robert Baron and Ana C. Cara (University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

⁶ Julia Kristeva, “Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman,” *Critique* XXIII, 239 (April 1967): 438–465; published as “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Columbia University Press, 1986).

⁷ Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Boston: Shambala Press, 1992).

⁸ Leonid Lipavsky, “Razgovory” [Conversations], *Moskovskii nabliudatel’* 5–6 (1992): 54–63.

⁹ Roger S. Jones, *Physics as Metaphor* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Humberto Maturana, “Biology of Cognition,” Biological Computer Laboratory Research Report BCL 9.0. Urbana IL: University of Illinois, 1970; reprinted in: *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), 5–58.

the conflicts between Greece and Persia. Alexander's campaigns, which united the Greek, Persian, and Egyptian worlds, determined the emergence of Hellenism. Militaristic Rome gave the world an originally hybrid culture. The Renaissance was made possible by the Crusaders acquainting their co-religionists with the heritage of Antiquity, with the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations. The Enlightenment and Romanticism owe their emergence not least to the colonial expansion of the maritime powers, whose ships delivered the pollen of alien cultures to Europe over several centuries.

And so Antoine Galland translates *The Thousand and One Nights*. Jean Chardin captures the limelight by publishing diaries of his travels to Persia and India. The Marquise de Pompadour introduces the fashion for China; General Robert Clive, the fashion for the East Indies; Napoleon, the fashion for Egypt. And the end of Japan's self-isolation, in the mid-nineteenth century, leads to the emergence of Japonism, which still flourishes today. In the era of modernity, the era of world's fairs and world wars, transcontinental borrowings and intertextuality become commonplaces.

12. But what about the histories of the Souths, Easts, Far Norths, and all the other points we see on the horizon through the kaleidoscope, points without number? These points have also inherited a legacy of sorts, including the fruits of modernization, trauma syndrome, imperial architectural landmarks, the dubious gifts of the Columbian Exchange, and even new Creole languages and cultures, whose ranges, marked on the map with dotted lines, coincide with the favorite routes of colonizers. The local histories are still being written.

Although the benefits of gene recombination are not so obvious here, they can certainly be found by the generations who have grown up in relative independence and have overcome the consequences of trauma—repressed feelings of inferiority that manifest themselves, as is often the case, in purism, a denial of “outside influences,” the elaboration of uncontaminated bloodlines, and delusions of grandeur.

13. Cultural clashes are painful, and each particular case is special. The type of modernization that the Soviet regime wrought in Central Asia was of course very different from Europe's colonialist enterprises. In terms of its origins, however, it was the same progressivist expansion of the European Enlightenment, in this case armed with scientific theories of social change. It was this particular modernization that gave rise to the modern Central Asian states. Among other things, it led here to the creation of a cultural infrastructure that to this day defines the Central Asian version of modernity. For the time being, this version is more reminiscent of the Brezhnev era, when this infrastructure congealed once and for all—in the form of a number of government institutions, “cultural centers” that understand their function as that of conservation, and culture itself as a purely ethnic or “national” phenomenon. There are Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Russian, Korean, Uighur, and other cultural centers, but there is not a single local institution that would support the inquisitive, transgressive, and critical tradition of postmodernity, a tradition inter- or extra-national in nature.

By analogy with the ethnic/national cultural centers, such a center could bear the name “Creoleaks.” We could develop the metaphor of Creoleness even further by likening Soviet Central Asian culture to a kind of pidgin, bearing in mind its well-known stiltedness and non-independence (especially in the early stages), which were a direct consequence of the extreme conditions that gave rise to it: civil war, division into national territories, the so-called Little October policy in Kazakhstan in the mid-twenties, collectivization, deportation and persecution, censorship, and the Iron Curtain. The credo of official Soviet art—“national in form, socialist in content”—is surprisingly consistent with the relationship, described by linguists, between a lexically dominant language (content) and a subordinate substrate language (form) in the

formation of mixed dialects.¹¹ In this vision, the next phase of development (involving the advent of a new generation, open to various influences, amidst the ruins of this bipartite culture) should, in theory, be a process in which new symbolic systems are self-assembled from the disparate, misappropriated fragments of the old systems: that is, creolization.

14. However, in our fickle way of looking at things, Creoleness is not an affirmation of a new identity, but rather the negation of what exists. Indeed, we can no longer link the existing cultural variety on the planet solely to the idea of the national as something special.¹² To hell with pelagic fish, but what about the hunting traditions of killer whales or the hydraulic architecture of beavers? The particular has many faces; its sources are innumerable, and its boundaries are not defined; while the national is merely a historically established “western fashion,” a socio-political construct, a form of macro-level power relations that did not exist in the past and will not exist in the future. Even today, cultural differences do not cleave to national borders, but coalesce on the level of individual personalities, who are least nominally free to define their own ways of life in places where the urban environment allows the co-existence of different eras and lifestyles.

Such self-determination—the replacement of fixed, inherited collective identities with personal, mosaic-like, incomplete identities, arising here and there in full compliance with the DIY ethic and the logic of “molecular” revolutions—can also contribute (why not?) to an affirmative understanding of Creoleness as a model of individuation, a mechanism for the emergence of autonomy, and a means of liberation from the power of grand ideologies. This model insists on the growing multiplicity and value of differences, while simultaneously recognizing both their constructedness/conditionality and their totality/irresistibility.

For all that, “Creoleaks self-determination,” as one specimen of tactical essentialism, is of course an involuntary step. Autonomy is acquired thanks to the desire to survive in adverse conditions. The production of a Creoleaks subjectivity is based on the painful experience of unsuccessful socialization—the experience of rejection and non-recognition on both sides of any border whatsoever. The oscillation of identifications is the outcome of a neurotic internalization of unresolved external contradictions. It ensures the escalation of internal conflicts thanks to which identity can remain weak and volatile, thus preserving its transgressive, creatively peacekeeperish potential.

15. In the phrase “all people are different,” the universalizing “all” is in irreconcilable conflict with the particularizing “different.” What if we are not “all”? How is the universal possible? The past era has left us with a lot of similar questions. It was a time of large-scale alliances and unifications, ambitious ideological projects, and nations. Whereas the ancient wars, involving tribes and kingdoms, could be devastating for those same tribes and kingdoms, wars involving nations were nightmares come true and could have brought about the destruction of life per se. Any principle of unification—an idea that consolidated, knowledge that shaped a society—always implied a projective image of those who were excluded, of aliens. Creating a community required the raising of walls: hostility was a condition of friendship—people were united by hatred.

The restless Europeans, perhaps, discovered before others that the world is large, and people are different everywhere. One man’s weird is another man’s world: what is good for the Russian is death to the German. It was possible to derive direct benefits from this discovery by enforcing

¹¹ John Holm, *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² Sharon Bailin, “Culture, Contamination, and Creativity: How Newness Enters The World,” Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Annual Conference, March 30, 2007.

the principle of “divide and rule.” However, the heirs of the vainglorious era of nations—*Creoleaks*—will have to make the next, more fundamental discovery: the world is small, and people are the same everywhere. The globe’s inhabitants are everywhere and always sitting at its edge—and waiting for their time to end so they can slip over the edge, never to return. In this perspective, all observers whatsoever share a common fate and belong to the same species, sex, race, nation, class, faith, and so on. Our solidarity with any breath of life, including non-biological forms, is based on this simple thing: we are mysteriously mortal and strikingly alone. Maybe that is why nothing inhuman is alien to us.

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