On Creolization –
Theorizing Caribbean Identity

The Self/Other Dynamic in Colonialist Discourse

Ever since Columbus first set foot on the Caribbean islands in 1492, the collision of different cultural attitudes and practices has marked the development of the emergent New World societies and their complex processes of identity formation. As Tzvetan Todorov in his seminal work on the discovery of America has argued, the New World "conquest" marked the "beginning of the modern era," when Christian missionary doctrine and its discourse of conquest appropriated alterity in the name of 'Colonial Other,' i.e. according to its own strategic needs and discursive modalities (1984: 5). Columbus' conquering spirit was thus guided by what Todorov calls a "finalist strategy," i.e. the belief in biblical revelation, rather than empiricist doubt (1984: 17-23). Colonialism's authoritative argument did not allow for experience to find its own explanations, but conceived of Columbus' 'discovery' of America as the fulfillment of divine will and prophecy. While the early conquest was still bound to this medieval-oriented mindset, Spain's quest for gold and other resources articulated a pre-capitalist attitude, which was clearly oriented towards a modernist paradigm (Todorov 1984: 42). Accordingly, Columbus' perception of the Amerindians negotiated between a Christian universalist acknowledgement of their humanity on the one hand, and a capitalist exploitative denial of it on the other. Amerindian alterity was thus construed from an egocentric perspective

as in-between (as)similar and different, prone to assimilation as much as exploitation and slave labor. As Todorov describes, this attitude denied "the existence of a human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself" (1984: 42-43). This ego-centered constitution of ambiguous alterity became paradigmatic for the subject formation in the colonial contact zone, where the Self/Other dynamic resulted in a mutual failure of recognition. While difference and otherness were discovered, they were not accepted on their own terms.

The colonial Other's contradictory image appeared similarly ambiguous on behalf of the colonization of the African continent. While the first conquerors in the 15th century appeared more interested in trade and geography than ethnic categorization, African phenotypical and cultural difference, however, were soon categorized by the imperialist rhetoric as 'heathenish savages,' allegedly in need of Christian 'civilization.'[1] In fact, the pejorative connotation of 'blackness' dated back to Graeco-Roman antiquity and became epitomized during medieval and Renaissance Christianity in Europe, as Mervyn Alleyne in his recent study *The Construction and Representation of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World* (2002) has pointed out. Colonialism thus reinforced that pre-classical black/white dichotomy in terms of a psycho-sociological argument by superimposing a metaphorical reading of darkness versus light, wilderness vs. civilization, etc. Through such allegorical transformation, phenotype became symbolically charged and ultimately foundational for the white Western claim to cultural hegemony (Alleyne 2002: 52).

According to this brutal reasoning, Africans were captured, enslaved and shipped to the Caribbean in exchange for exclusive tropical goods, which at the end of the gruesome journey filled the plates and coffee cups of imperial Europe.[2] Following the Portuguese slave trad-

---

1   From the sixteenth century onwards, Western colonial expansion had been claiming power in the name of putative 'civilization' or a "civilizing mission" in order to justify the oppression and enslavement of colonized peoples. Colonial administration, missionary work and education system thus sought to superimpose their Eurocentric value system in order to supersede and erode indigenous cultural practices (Bolaffi et al. 2003: 38).

2   According to recent estimates approximately 12 million Africans count victim to the transatlantic slave trade between 1450 and 1870 (Guérivière 2004: 31-32). Wole Soyinka in his call for reparations and „full cognition of the African world as an equal sector of a universal humanity" has pointed out that „the Atlantic slave trade remains an inescapable critique

ing presence on the African coastline since 1500, John Hawkins was the first English slave trader, who in 1562 captured 300 African slaves in Sierra Leone and sold them to Hispaniola. His example was soon to be followed by other European countries, all of them keen on introducing African slave labor to their expanding colonies in the Americas. These first looting encounters furthered the colonialist image of 'savage Africans,' who of course violently resisted their enslavement (Walvin 2001: 23-26). Even though slavery had been an ongoing cultural practice of Trans-Sahara trading before the arrival of the first Portuguese explorers on the African West Coast, slave trading rose to a formerly unknown level, when European goods were first exported in exchange for African captives (Guérivière 2004: 30). Thus, one might argue that when Columbus undertook his second voyage to the Caribbean in 1493, right there and then the world's first global trading had begun. Columbus, in fact, first introduced sugar cane to the islands' natural crops. By 1516, only a couple of years later, the first sugar was already grown in Santo Domingo and soon to be shipped back to Spain. With the rise of sugar prices in Europe, the demand for African slaves increased steadily and the 'business' was transformed into an early system of mass production by the English in the early 17th century.

The English colonizers conquered Barbados in 1625 and Jamaica should follow soon after, when taken over from the Spanish in 1655. From 1702 until 1808 an estimated 830,857 Africans had been shipped to Jamaica to produce the wealth, pleasure and consumption of the British Empire in the commercial products of tobacco, tea, coffee and sugar (Walvin 2001: 6). Slavery and the exploitative plantation system – "combining the worst features of feudalism and capitalism without the virtues of neither" (Eric Williams) – thus created a distinct hierarchy of oppression and societal sectionalism, which were to endure long after Jamaica's emancipation from slavery in 1834/38.[3] Under the British 'black' as a phenotype designation finally became synonymous for the status of slave, a chattel, deprived of humanity and subjected to brutal exploitation. Hence, James Walvin has claimed that "the slave trade

---

of European humanism […] that voided a continent, it is estimated, of some twenty million souls" (1999: 38-39).

3 Emancipation was officially granted in 1834, yet followed by four years of so-called 'apprenticeship,' which means that full freedom was actually only achieved by 1838. Eric Williams pointed out that slavery in the Caribbean had been less of a racialist than economic system (1964: 7).

was a system conceived, sustained and nurtured by interrelated systems of violence" (2001: 19).

With the rise of sugar production and plantation society in the 18th century, colonialist identity politics were increasingly defined by the ideological mix of social Darwinism and its racist rhetoric of biological determinism, which discursively cemented colonialist hierarchy in the Caribbean. Enslaved Africans were exploited as convenient slave labor commodity and – in order to disguise the inhumanity of that capitalist practice – Europe constructed a psychologically powerful and discursively convincing counter-image of African alterity to maintain its putative state of superior civilization, knowledge, and – likely the most important of the three – economic wealth (Alleyne 2002: 63). European ethnocentrism in combination with its military super-power hence levered to a great extent the Self/Other relation in the Caribbean and achieved "virtually complete control over significant symbols and values" (Alleyne 2002: 13; 25). Africans in the New World environment were consequently forced to adjust to a system of control that from their own epistemological background was inaccessible to them, because they were suddenly confronted with a racist scheme that debased 'blackness' and assigned Africans to the lowest social strata (Alleyne 2002: 84).

Furthermore, the trauma of the Middle Passage, of slavery and the internalization of colonialist racism resulted – according to Martiniquan psychiatrist Frantz Fanon – in a psycho-pathological personality complex. In his influential study *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon has thus described the diaspora's psychological trauma in terms of a "black skin, white mask" dichotomy. In this work, he first addressed the paradoxical absence of an African cultural heritage in Caribbean identity discourse and analyzed the distorted self-image that this absence had created. His analysis of the culturally alienated French Antilles as "zone of nonbeing" and "existential threat to the Afro-Caribbean ego-genesis," has since become one of the key texts to outline the psycho-pathology of African Caribbean self-perception (Henry 1996: 231). Based on Hegelian dialectics and French existentialist thought, Fanon's theory of black alterity – similar to what Sartre described in "Anti-Semite and Jew" (1948) – argues that black Otherness suffers from cultural "over-determination" and is therefore denied access to free identity formation.

According to Hegelian dialectics, self-consciousness results from a primary relatedness of the I to an outside Other: "Ich ist der Inhalt der

Beziehung und das Beziehen selbst; es ist es selbst gegen ein Anderes, und greift zugleich über dies Andre über, das für es ebenso nur es selbst ist" (Hegel 1999: 132). The Other as desired object of self-consciousness and recognition is annihilated in the process of self formation, yet because of that conscious act of annihilation the Other also comes into being, i.e. as a Self ("daß dies Aufheben sei, muß dies Andere sein" (Hegel 1999: 138). As a result, Hegel points out that self-consciousness can only be realized through this doubling process of mutual recognition. He argues: „Die Bewegung ist also schlechthin die gedoppelte beider Selbstbewußtsein. Jedes sieht *das Andre* dasselbe tun, was *es* tut; jedes tut selbst, was es an das Andre fordert; und tut darum, was es tut, auch *nur* insofern, als das Andre dasselbe tut; das einseitige Tun wäre unnütz; weil, was geschehen soll, nur durch beide zustande kommen kann" (1999: 141). While Hegel's master slave dialectic is based on the unequal power binary that divides into an independent and a dependent consciousness, it is, however, through the slave's work for the master that such division will ultimately be subverted and self-consciousness be gained. Through the act of rebellion, the slave fights successfully for self-recognition (Hegel 1999: 142-146).[4]

Transferring this argument to colonialist discourse, David T. Goldberg has argued that the colonialist objectification of Otherness hence posed under a highly permeable guise (1996: 184). Representing the colonized as a subhuman species, colonialist hegemony was founded on a make-belief strategy which superimposed colonialist discourse on difference as Other, i.e. inferior and more importantly: free labor to uphold early capitalism. Following Hegel's dialectic, European selfhood thus asserted itself via the annihilating construct of African alterity. However, this could only succeed as long as the ones thus subdued were also made believe in that superimposed self-image. As Michael Pickering's analysis of the Self/Other dynamic has claimed: "Otherness exists to subjugate its objects and assign them to their natural place at the behest of those who thereby reconstitute themselves as subjects" (2001: 71). Far from 'natural,' however, the process of objectification is split. As Anthony Froude's 1888 depiction of a black boy, whom he had encountered on board his ship towards the West Indies, for example, illustrates, the perception of the Other in the colonial encounter appears inherently ambivalent:

---

4   Robert Stern has furthermore argued that precisely through working for the master, the slave will achieve a fuller self-consciousness for being made aware of controlling the objective world (2002: 85).

There was a small black boy among us, evidently of pure blood, for his hair was wool and his colour black as ink. His parents must have been well-to-do, for the boy had been in Europe to be educated. The officers on board and some of the ladies played with him as they would play with a monkey. He had little more sense than a monkey, perhaps less, and the gestures of him grinning behind gratings and pushing his long thin arms between the bars were curiously suggestive of the original from whom we are told now that all of us came (1969: 25).

Froude's racist reasoning here clearly contradicts its own discourse, when he assumes that the boy must have received education and ergo possesses higher intelligence. The example thus reveals Froude's imperial eye/I-constitution as an ambivalent mode of self-assertion, so regrettably common of his time. So while colonialism and its make-belief strategies sought to dominate alterity by rendering it inferior, the Other's mere presence continuously undermined colonialism's hegemonic claim.

Fortunately, therefore, self-recognition is no one-way street. In contact with the New World's Others the European Self was also altered. Considering the nature of slavery in Jamaican plantation society, Edward Kamau Brathwaite has thus commented that, in fact, slavery in the Caribbean was hardly abstract, but shaped colonials as much as colonized, when "white attitudes to slaves and to slavery, were [...] in a subtle, intimate manner, also white attitudes and sentiments about themselves" (1971: 178-179). The undeniable reciprocity of the colonial Self/Other dynamic and its process of mutually affecting the constitution of self consciousness consequently marked the beginning of the Caribbean's emerging anti-essentialist Creole identity – precisely, the point where the Other's resistance and fight for self-assertion historically set in.

Hybrid Cultures – Creolist Metaphors

While according to Fanon's dialectics black self-constitution appears trapped by the othering gaze of white supremacy, Homi K. Bhabha's poststructuralist reading has reassessed this argument and positioned Fanon's analysis as the theoretical "purveyor of the transgressive and transitional" (1986: xiii). Even though Bhabha's analysis has been critiqued for stretching Fanon's argument unduly, I would still defend his reading against the grain, for it approaches Fanon's underlying Hege-

lian dialectics in terms of their revolutionary potential. At least theoretically, this shatters the fixity of the divisional bind. Hence, regardless of whether this theoretical transgression can be achieved in reality or not, Bhabha's "performative politics" of cultural hybridity turn the gaze on the oppressor and enable a powerful starting point for postcolonial critique.[5]

By appropriating Fanon, Bhabha declares the Other's subservient state ultimately over. He claims:

The Black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a space for the Socius; its present, dismembered and dislocated, will not contain the image of identity that is questioned in the dialectic of mind/body and resolved in the epistemology of 'appearance and reality'. The White man's eyes break up the Black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed (1986: xii).

---

5   Bhabha's hybridity discourse has been frequently attacked for its alleged evasiveness towards the political struggle. Shalini Puri, for example, considers his "separation of the material and symbolic" problematic, for Bhabha's "valorization of a formal deconstruction of narrative authority displaces any exploration of the continuing effects of power and inequality as well as any work to construct an opposition to that inequality" (2004: 19). Hybridity as a trope in postmodern academic discourse gained currency despite of its conceptual slipperiness, because it enabled the deconstruction of formerly totalitarian and essentialist thinking. As such, Puri argues, it remains largely a discourse of the privileged cosmopolitan centers and its academies in New York, London, and Toronto, with relatively little impact on the persistent inequality between the cultural agents thus described (2004: 22). Ultimately, Puri concludes that hybridity discourse remains seriously flawed, because of its problematic "tendency to present hybridity as the synthetic transcendence of tyrannical and reductive binary oppositions" (2004: 38). Rather than to further blind oneself to the factual injustices at hand, Puri hence suggests a critique of Cultural Studies' anti-essentialist stake, which according to her argument only serves to conveniently prevent one from the more complicated task of taking a distinct political stand. However, against her critique I assert that "synthetic transcendence" points to a utopian vision that postcolonial politics need to hypothesize in order for the political struggle to continue, i.e. precisely as the vision of an anti-essentialist, ideally color-blind, just and free world for everyone.

Identity can consequently only – if ever – be achieved the instant that it is already lost: i.e. in the relational encounter. Whatever I perceive of the Other will in the continuing process of never ending self-constitution alter my own self-image. Bhabha's recuperation of Fanon's 'critical edge' thus transgresses the racist stigma as he opens it for re-demptive reassessment. As Bhabha's argument quite convincingly claims, this strategic subversion of the status quo sets out "not to unveil the fullness of Man, but to manipulate his representation" (1986: xxiii).

Bhabha's notion of "cultural hybridity" as the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [...] that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" thus strives to dislocate the totalitarian assumptions underlying the binary opposition (Bhabha 1994: 4). As he points out, "the act of cultural enunciation – the *place of utterance* – is crossed by the différance of writing," thereby ensuring that "meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent" but rather remains ambiva-lent (1994: 36). The Derridean notion of *différance* in Bhabha's postcolo-nial theory thus "puts difference into play" as it deconstructs any claim to hegemonic knowledge and points to the underlying "system of thought, which makes binary logic possible" (McQuillan 2000: 18-19). While *différance* does not dissolve the binary, it strategically splits hegemonic discourse in order to subvert its oppressive meaning. Hy-bridity can therefore be thought of as "that which makes all identity possible just as it undoes the possibility of a pure identity" (McQuillan 2000: 22). As a result, "hybrid identity" is impossible as it, too, disap-pears as it appears and ultimately gives depressing proof of the recu-perative effects of the binary logic.[6]

In this respect, postcolonial discourse on hybridity intersects to some extent with Caribbean discourse on creolization. Hence, it is no longer a secret that "non-Caribbean scholars have increasingly turned to the Caribbean for theoretical tools – such as the concept of creolisa-tion – with which to decipher global culture" (Shepherd/Richards

---

6   McQuillan points out that deconstruction of racial identity is in fact never-ending, because of the "recuperative effects of metaphysics" (2000: 15). And yet, despite of constant frustration deconstruction needs to con-tinue in an effort to unveil the underlying power play of identity politics worldwide. Similarly, Mills has argued for a "social ontology of a racial world," which despite of the constructedness of the concept of race, "need[s] to locate race, not merely the overtly raced nonwhites, particu-larly blacks, but the seemingly unraced whites, whose racial markers van-ish into the apparent universality of the colorless normative" (Mills 1998: 12).

2002: xv). Tracing the etymological origin of the term *creole*, Carolyn Allen in her article "Creole: The Problem of Definition" lists the following possible derivations of the term which either was introduced by Portuguese conquerors and later taken up by the Spanish (meaning "to create" = Latin *criar*), or stemmed from African Kikoongo (= "outsider") source (2002: 49). One of the earliest available documents, however, suggests that "criollo" was, indeed, a term originally introduced by Africans with reference to their children born in the New World. As Garcilaso el Inca (Peru 1602) states:

Es nombre que inventaron los negros y así lo muestra la obra. Quiere decir entre los negros, nascido en Indias; inventáronlo para diferenciar los que van de acá [es decir, del Viejo Mundo, que incluye Africa], nascidos en Guinea, de los que nascen allá [América], porque se tienen por mas honrados y de mas calidad por haber nascido en su patria, que no sus hijos, porque nascieron en la ajena, y los padres se ofenden si les llaman criollos. Los espanoles, por la semejanza, han introducido este nombre en su lenguaje, para nombrar los nascidos allá (in: Shepherd/Richards 2002: 49).

While there is as of yet no concluding argument for whether "creole" referred indeed to a racial discourse of favoring either a 'whitening,' or respectively 'blackening' of the New World born generation in terms of colonialist racial policy, the more important point needs to be made for its claim of locality over foreignness to the New World environment.[7] In this respect, Creole identity was an indigenous creation, as it also distinguished descendants of the New World diaspora from the autochthonous Amerindian population of the time. Allen stresses the importance of that dual quality of Creole identity, because it asserted cultural difference as a relational rather than essential feature (Shepherd/Richards 2002: 50). Moreover, creolization not only involved Europeans and Africans, but also different African ethnicities, who came in fact from rather different ethnic backgrounds yet merged into one strategically effective community under the stress of racialized slavery (Lovejoy/Trotman 2002: 85). Creolization thus evolved as a

---

7   The controversy here arises from the different employment of the term in Latin America and the Caribbean islands. While "criollo" in Latin America referred to the New World born descendants of the Spanish and their ideology of "criollismo," a whitening of their culture, "creole" on the islands rather referred to the cultural impact of the Africans. It is this conflated usage of the term that has made it problematic in the eyes of many Caribbean intellectuals (Shepherd/Richards 2002: 53-55).

theoretical discourse of an anti-essentialist postcolonial Caribbean identity.

In this context Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (1971) and *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974) are considered two key texts for Creole identity discourse in the Anglophone Caribbean. His seminal analysis defines creolization for Jamaica as "a cultural process perceived as taking place within a continuum of space and time" (1974: 10).[8] His concept encompasses two aspects: 1. "ac/culturation" as "the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case African to European) and 2. "inter/culturation" as the "unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship proceeding from this yoke" (Brathwaite 1974: 6). According to Brathwaite's analysis of plantation society, colonialism operated under three systems of control: 1. the mercantilist system that extracted raw material from the region and which caused the economic dependency that goes on to the present day, 2. the plantation system that created social inequality and racism, 3. the imperial government that was at the heart of a fragmented, Euro-centered elite, a Euro-oriented Creole upper class and a small Creole intellectual elite "lacking in vision and roots" (1974: 28-29). Hence, creolization in his definition does not create a synthesis of different cultural elements, but must rather be perceived as "cracked, fragmented, ambivalent, not certain of itself, subject to shifting lights and pressures," for it constantly faces new cultural input from East-Indian, Lebanese and Asian immigration as well as North American economical and cultural influence (Brathwaite 1974: 6).

Brathwaite's conception of Creole identity was at the time conceived in direct opposition to M.G. Smith's work on the plural society model for the West Indies (see Smith 1965). While Smith had stressed the region's sectionalism of color, culture and class, Brathwaite sought to overcome this division. Smith had argued that the slaves were for

---

8   Brathwaite's understanding of the term "creole" derives from its use in Jamaica, where the Spanish "criollo" referred to those who were "born in, native to, committed to the area of living, [...] used in relation to both white and black, free and slave" (1974: 10). Part of the controversy around creolist discourse of the Anglophone Caribbean has been raised for its racist assimilationist ideology in promoting Eurocentrism and marginalising the African influence. Brathwaite is not negligent of this fact, but refers to it specifically as "Euro-creole" (1974: 6). For further critique of the discourse compare Burton Sankeralli, "From Attempted Theory to Failed Praxis. A Look at Creolist Ideology" (unpubl. seminar paper 2002).

the most part excluded from British cultural and social life, because of the prevalent laissez-faire economic doctrine and racism of the colonial administration. Even after Emancipation and the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion, Jamaican Creole society had failed to enfranchise and thereby integrate the majority of the former slave population.[9] As a result, up until 1938 the island was still ruled by the 1% white population in control of the monopoly on political and economic affairs (Smith 1965: 314). Smith's argument therefore concluded that Creole society had never achieved full integration and thus remained plural in a sectional sense, i.e. mainly divided into a white European versus black African "mixture of discordant and incompatible elements" (Smith 1965: 307). However, against such binary logic, creolist discourse in the wake of Brathwaite and the post-independence struggle for national reconciliation sought precisely to overcome this sectionalism by stressing the African Creole heritage in counterbalance to Eurocentric hegemony.

Post-independence theoretical (re)assessment of creolization in the wake of Brathwaite's pioneering analysis, hence, divides into two strands: the one which declares Creole culture as "entirely new", the other which rather regards it as a New World African continuum (see Mintz/Price 1992; Alleyne 1988). The controversy clearly marks the political struggle for recognition, which accuses the former view of a European-assimilationist bias, while the latter stresses an Afrocentric perspective. Celebratory visions of creolization, such as the French Caribbean notion of "créolité," are partly contested, because they seem to support a European-oriented assimilationist agenda (see Bernabé et al. 1989; Glissant 1989). Historically torn between a colonial Europe and colonized Africa, Caribbean society thus still struggles for a balancing representational politics to negotiate ethnic polarization with an ongoing effort towards integration (Shepherd/Richards 2002: xiv). As Nigel Bolland has furthermore pointed out, the interconnectedness of Creole discourse as a metaphor for political decolonization links Creole identity politics also directly to the question of postcolonial nation-building. Creolization in this context, he argues, primarily presents "the ideology of a particular social segment, namely a middle class intelligentsia, which seeks a leading role in an integrated, newly independent society" (Bolland 2002: 17-18).

---

9   The 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion was led by Paul Bogle and George William Gordon, two leaders of the Native Baptist Church. Their rebellion was a further step of the impoverished African Jamaican workers towards full civil rights and liberty (Sherlock/Bennett 1998: 246ff.).

Contradictory as the concept of creolization thus appears, Allen's critical assessment of the discourse subsumes the following seven principles, which I believe to outline the continuing issues of Caribbean identity politics as being:

1. A movement away from origin and the difficulty of reconstructing a path back to the source(s) suggested in the etymology of the term.
2. The inescapability of difference, recalling that Creole was introduced to mark the appearance of a simultaneously similar/dissimilar type.
3. With the historical experience of colonialism which gave rise to its use, the primacy of cross-cultural encounter and the location of Creoleness at an intersection, negotiating between identities and forces, and defined by its relations.
4. The consequence, however strongly resisted, of a modification of type involving rejection, adaptation, accommodation, imitation, invention.
5. The value of nativisation or indigenisation, marking the point of recognition of that new type as belonging to the locale.
6. Yet, the difficulty of fully accounting for this type which does not become a fixed form but continues in a dynamic process of interaction with new influences.
7. The multiplicity of Creole forms/types making context and point of view crucial to understanding (Allen 2002: 56-57).

Following the above chart, creolist discourse in the Caribbean has consequently emerged as a powerful discursive metaphor to announce the region's anti-essentialist in-betweenness to deconstruct Eurocentrism's hegemonic claim to colonial power. In line with Robert Baron's recent suggestion to adapt the metaphorical meaning of the term *Creole* from its culture specific origin in identity and language discourse to a broader conceptual framework, creolization may therefore lastly – probably precisely because of its inner controversy – acknowledge the cultural dynamics in an increasingly transcultural world (Baron 2003: 88; 90-92).

Considered as strategic metaphor, creolist discourse encompasses in fact a variety of political performances, which via language, dance, and music have traditionally informed many of the subversive and revolutionary anti-colonial struggles of the African Creole cultural complex. Speaking of creolist 'metaphors' in this context, I will suggest that the subversive power of creolist discourse is based precisely on its metaphoric ambivalence. As will be demonstrated in the following

analysis of Caribbean dance theatre choreography, the identificatory moment of these performative gestures appears to rely largely on a shared iconicity derived from Africanist diasporic aesthetics in the New World, despite of the certainly also present European mnemonic trace. Throughout its historical development from New World emancipatory rhetoric towards the transnational reality of the new millennium then, creolization continues to delineate a powerful metaphor with which to address the political implications of the Caribbean quest for postcolonial nationalism.

Nationalist Rhetoric

We are sorely troubled in Jamaica over this question of identity. We are in doubt about the use of the phrase "Jamaican Culture" but it is used everywhere today, vague, in definition, being held doggedly by a people suffering from what, on the face of it, is the multiplicity of cultural choices (Dawes 1975: 34).

Nationalist rhetoric argued that the diverse mixtures on the islands did not preclude a common identity but could allow for the possibility of unification through a blended culture, the tertium quid. The politics of creolization was simultaneously engaged to articulate nationalism, pan-Caribbeanism, and pan-Africanism as black cultures became the new domain of struggle. The marginal majority, the disenfranchised black people, became the central referents in the national culture of the "common man," as the global processes of democratization and decolonization coincided with the emergence of black consciousness and working-class struggles (Nair 2000: 239).

Discourse on nationalism has been varied and at times highly conflated in its ideological output. While in the 19th century national identity formation came to have racist outgrowths, it became increasingly militant and fascist in its totalitarianism towards the middle of the twentieth century (see Hutchinson/Smith 1994). Inherent to nationalism's many conceptual definitions is a somewhat primordial sense of communal belonging, of a priori shared kinship and a presumed common/shared identity. Also, nationalism promotes an instrumentalist approach as its rhetoric mobilizes disenfranchised groups towards their emancipatory projects. In short, nationalism makes use of the past in order to subvert the present and bears the auspicious promise of a better world for all of 'us'. Just to whom this 'us' refers has often been the

cause of sometimes heated debate other times gruesomely violent military confrontation and abysmal genocide.

In his influential *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Ernest Gellner – next to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) – was among the first historians to suggest a reading of nationalism as part of the process of modernity. By demystifying the supposed origin of nations and nationalist movements, Gellner's "modernist approach" relates emerging nationalist movements directly to their level of industrialization.[10] As economic well-being and advance increase, Gellner argues, industrialization calls for a culturally homogenous group of people, which by a standardized education is, at least theoretically, provided with egalitarian access to the market place. National culture becomes the legitimizing force for the existence of the nation as it unites a formerly diverse population under one common set of identifications. During this process of cultural unification dissenting groups have either the choice to assimilate to the national norm, or to form their own separatist nation. Either way though, in order to convince the people of their nationality, nationalism has to build on that oftentimes rather romanticized notion of a common cultural heritage and tradition. As the nation is invented, so to speak, identifications borrow from pre-existing low or folk cultures, to yet form another variant of high culture of its own. Gellner describes the process as such:

Nationalism usually conquers in the name of a putative folk culture. Its symbolism is drawn from the healthy, pristine, vigorous life of the peasants, of the Volk, the narod. There is a certain element of truth in the nationalist self-presentation when the narod or Volk is ruled by officials of another, an alien high culture, whose oppression must be resisted first by a cultural revival and reaffirmation, and eventually by a war of national liberation. If the nationalism prospers it eliminates the alien high culture, but it does not then replace it by the old local low culture; it revives, or invents, a local high (literate, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with the earlier local folk styles and dialects (1983: 57).

---

10 Anthony D. Smith defines the "modernist approach" to nationalism as being "sociologically necessary" while "obviously logically contingent" (1999: 47).

Certainly, such "invention" of high culture, which is based on elements from the former low culture, was particularly evident in the emergence of postcolonial nationalism of the 1960s.

However, postcolonial nationalism should oftentimes rather be regarded as a culturally empowering corrective to the experience of dislocation and estrangement than as a reversed kind of imperialism in this context. Also referred to as "alternative modernity," postcolonial nationalism thus reclaims nationalist concepts in order to arrive at new modes of self-representation (Gunn et al. 1999: 4-5).[11] In this respect, postcolonial nationalism becomes decidedly *inter*nationalist in perspective (Bhabha 1994: 38-39). As Frantz Fanon's argument in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) makes clear, folk culture serves as a legitimizing tool to heighten a formerly denigrated pre-colonial past. However, as such it will always be bound to present a response to that denigration rather than to generate an authentic claim. It is thus through the nationalist "rhetoric of belonging" that postcolonial nationalism developed first of all into a strategic statement of resistance and decolonization (Pickering 2001: 101).[12] Cultural revolution, though, is ultimately brought about by a self-critical re-appropriation of the past, which Fanon has characterized as follows:

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the everpresent reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in under-developed countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on (1990: 188).

---

11 Similarly Bhabha speaks of "postcolonial contra-modernity" as being "contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies" but also "deploy[ing] the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to 'translate', and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity" (1994: 6).

12 Edward Said referred to this circumstance as "the tragedy of resistance," as "it must to a certain degree work to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire" (Said 1994: 253).

As an integral instrument in the liberation struggle, postcolonial nationalism hence operates under two intertwined agendas: the one to assert an identity and demand recognition, the other to modernize and progress towards full participation in the global market-place and its politics (Geertz 1994: 30).[13] Furthermore, postcolonial politics operate on the ambivalence within nationalism itself, which – as Anthony D. Smith has pointed out – simultaneously operates on modern and premodern concepts (1999: 56). Especially the evocation of the latter serves as the foundational claim that lends the new nation "political definition and social depth," since "[t]hese memories, myths, symbols and traditions are not only alive in sections of the population, they are [also] ancestral and distinctive" (Smith 1999: 56).

Afrocentric discourse within the Caribbean national paradigm of creolization pays therefore tribute to precisely such "ancestral and distinctive" memory. Re-shaping the postcolonial nation as "African Jamaican," for example, speaks to such a unifying sensibility that exceeds Gellner's and particularly Anderson's model of more or less arbitrary composition, since Jamaica's African traditions are directly derived from the cultural heritage of the formerly disenfranchised. Not only are these living testimonies of survival and resistance, but they also convey an alternative frame for national identification. The postcolonial "return to ethno-history" is thus not only motivated by modernist progress, but also relies on its mass popular appeal which usually predates the modern development. As Smith concludes his argument:

[...] we must look to the fund of ethnic myths, symbols and values, and to the corpus of ethno-historical traditions, to inspire a sense of cohesion among the very different groups and often conflicting classes in a modern industrial society. While the mass media, mass education and political socialisation may all help to spread the ideas and beliefs of citizenship and democracy, only ethnic history and national traditions can unite the body of individual citizens and furnish a sense of belonging for groups with often disparate interests. Despite the familiar problems of selecting and cultivating ethnic history and traditions, particularly in polyethnic states, the creation of nations with a minimum sense of cohesion requires some set of ethnic memories and tradi-

---

13 Similarly, Rustom Bharucha has argued for a positive reassessment of a pro-nationalist perspective in one's definition of the cultural as a "potentially liberating force [...] particularly in relation to those people's movements against globalization in Third World countries, which could be the only hope for challenging and redemocratizing the state" (2000: 4).

tions, and to have some resonance, they must be drawn from the ethnic past of the majority or dominant *ethnie* (1999: 57).

As a result, "imagining the people" as unified in their diversity prevails as a political necessity in the Caribbean context, despite the region's postmodern hybridity. As Shalini Puri has stressed, colonization "has made national sovereignty and regional self-determination hard to sustain" and therefore indispensable to uphold against deconstructive aims (2004: 12). Postcolonial nationalism and its invention of a shared communal identity are consequently directly linked to the public's institutionalized means of representation, i.e. the nation's cultural performances.

The Politics of Representation

Public representations have the power to select, arrange, and prioritise certain assumptions and ideas about different kinds of people, bringing some to the fore, dramatising and idealising or demonising them, while casting others into the social margins, so that they have little active public presence or only a narrow and negative public image (Pickering 2001: xiii).

We live of course in a world not only of commodities but also of representation, and representations – their production, circulation, history, and interpretation – are the very element of culture. In much recent theory the problem of representation is deemed to be central, yet rarely is it put in its full political context, a context that is primarily imperial (Said 1994: 66).

As the preceding historical and discursive overview has shown, to speak of a Caribbean identity is already somewhat paradoxical, as cultural oneness is defied by the region's ethnic diversity. It is therefore interesting to look at the history of the term 'Caribbean' in order to understand the troublesome discomfort surrounding the many representational labels that have been ascribed to the region. As Norman Girvan summarizes the Caribbean's genealogy in his essay "Reinterpreting the Caribbean," it was not before the end of the nineteenth century that the term was introduced, and only in the 1940s that it actually gained currency (2001: 6-7). The Spanish colonizers had referred to "los caribes" as those allegedly cannibalistic tribes they first encountered in the New World. Later on the term "Caribbean" was applied by the US forces, whenever they felt need to "intervene South." In both cases though, the

designation appeared as a biased construct of imperialist power and only thereafter was it re-assessed and positively connoted by Caribbean intellectuals such as C.L.R. James, Eric Williams and Lloyd Best (Girvan 2001: 4). As a result, just who they are and where exactly they came from remained an obstacle for most of the Caribbean populations, who after only a century under colonial rule could trace their lineage(s) to all corners of the world.

Stuart Hall in "Negotiating Caribbean Identities" (2001) has furthermore remarked that the loss and mourning over origin must be linked to the question of representation, i.e. the question of who gets the say and who, on the other hand, is silenced in the rhetorical identity (re)invention process (26). In order to oppose the prevalent colonialist discourse, Caribbean intellectuals of the post-independence era therefore needed first of all to define a common set of identification models in order to effectively address the pressing political, cultural and economic exigencies. Among those identification "exercises" Stuart Hall lists the following three processes of cultural practice: 1. retention, 2. assimilation and 3. cultural revolution. Afrocentric discourse thus works as "strategic essentialism" of "black popular culture" as it paves revolutionary ground. However, Hall also makes clear that "blackness" as cultural signifier must necessarily be regarded as a "contradictory space," for it "can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high versus low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus inauthentic [...]" (1997: 128).

Similarly, Paul Gilroy in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) has referred to this strategic essentialism as a direct reaction to the African diaspora situation. According to his argument, the New World African diaspora's counter discourse drew self-consciously on pre-modern images and symbols – such as nationalism, universality, coherence of the subject, foundational ethnocentrism – to "gain an extra power in proportion to the brute facts of modern slavery" (1993: 56). Basing his argument on W.E.B. DuBois' notion of "double consciousness," Gilroy argues for the double significance of the black arts movement as it instigated the process of redefining modernity in the shadow of plantation society and slavery (1993: 56). While Gilroy's suggested "continuity of expressive culture" actually appears as an essentializing, pre-modern concept, he claims that its active re-imagination in the present creates, quite to the contrary, a distinctly modern interpretation of diaspora identity. As such

40

"Black Atlantic" identity evades binary coding as a "non-traditional tradition," which performatively fulfills the "mnemonic function" of upholding "social memory" against "the narrative of loss, exile, and journeying" (Gilroy 1993: 198).

However, even though such strategic representation seeks to avoid a fixed one to one relationship between signifier and signified, difference still remains culturally inscribed. The dilemma thus results in the question of how to deal with difference by neither dissolving nor fixing it. As Stuart Hall points out on behalf of assessing the "black subject" as culturally constructed, one needs to "re-theorize the concept of *difference*" as closer to Derrida's *différance*, i.e. a concept prone to constant deconstruction (1996: 447). Moreover – and at this point Hall appears to address what might be read as a prerequisite of Fanon's envisioned "new international humanism" – such "new ethnicity" would no longer be limited to signify the one nation or 'race,' but rather purport the "recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' or film-makers" (Hall 1996: 447).

Interlude I: Dance and Postcolonial Theory

Whereas postmodern deconstruction and hybridity discourse aim towards the relational openness of an endless signification process in order to evade the notion of essentialist unity, Caribbean postcolonial politics seek to construct and maintain precisely such strategic unity for achieving certain political ends. Caribbean identity politics thus struggle towards postcolonial nationalism and operate along the rhetoric of strategic essentialisms in order to gain representative power. Yet, as Bruce Robbins points out, such a humanist stance does not necessarily have to contradict the postmodern anti-humanism and enlightenment critique, since "humanism in at least one of its established meanings" has always been part of the postcolonial field (2000: 557ff.). Calling for a "new humanist paradigm," Robbins, hence, advocates a political stance that renounces the theoretical affiliation of universalism with imperialism. Instead of easily abandoning the normative claim of ethical universals then, Robbins suggests to face the challenge of those "large abstractions," which in practice have actually more often been

failed than fulfilled, when he quotes from Laclau, who elsewhere convincingly claimed:

If social struggles of new social actors show that the concrete practices of our society restrict the universalism or our political ideals to limited sectors of the population, it becomes possible to retain the universal dimension while widening the sphere of its application – which, in turn, will define the concrete contents of such universality. Through this process, universalism as a horizon is expanded at the same time as its necessary attachment to any particular content is broken. The opposite policy – that of rejecting universalism *in toto* as the particular content of the ethnia of the West – can only lead to a political blind alley (1995: 107).

In which respect exactly the fleeting art of dance can play an important part in this process will be the central focus of the following analysis of Jamaican dance theatre, its Creole aesthetics, and postcolonial identity politics.

42