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INTRODUCTION

Creole Subjects in the Colonial Americas

I do not marvel at the great defects and imbecility of those who are born in these lands . . . because the Spaniards who inhabit them, and even more those who are born here, assume these bad inclinations. Those who are born here become like the Indians, and although they look like Spaniards, in their constitution they are not; those who are born in Spain, if they do not take care, change within a few years after they arrive in these parts; and this I think is due to the climate or the constellations in these parts.—Bernardino de Sahagún (1590)

Why and how people who have descended from the Old World change once they are transplanted to the New already occupied the Spanish natural historians and ethnographers of the New World during the sixteenth century. Early modern writers such as Bernadino de Sahagún, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdes, and José de Acosta provided the earliest theories of “creolization”—the process of cultural change in different geographic locations that has interested anthropologists, cultural geographers, and linguists up to the present time. But, while modern scholars have often celebrated creolization in the New World as “creative adaptations,” evidencing human innovation and cultural diversification, in early modern times the fact that transplanted Europeans changed in the Americas was typically seen as profoundly disturbing, as evidence of a cultural “degeneration.”¹

The idea that human bodies and minds degenerated in the New World was based on two suppositions, both ultimately rooted in classical antiquity. The first one, humoral theory, was derived from the scientific thought of Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and others who held that a person’s physiological and psychological constitution was determined by the qualities of the natural environment or astrological constellation. The second supposition, rooted in Greco-Roman notions of barbarity and corroborated by early modern travel

1. The literature on degeneration is vast. For some seminal titles, see the Terminological and Bibliographical Notes at the end of this essay.

reports, alleged the savagery of the Americas' indigenous peoples. By way of logical deduction, early modern natural philosophers concluded that the natural environment and the skies of the New World were inhospitable to the development of human culture. Cultural changes observed in transplanted Europeans were, in this ethnocentric scheme, inevitably interpreted as a cultural decline. The polemic about creolization famously culminated during the eighteenth century, when it became a prominent topos in neoclassical natural philosophy. Thus, the debate over creole culture represents, as Karen Ordahl Kupperman has observed, a theme of "powerful continuity in European response" to America, as "European intellectuals, seeing difference as degeneracy, continued to treat America as a screen on which to project their own fears and fantasies."²

If the early modern debate over creolization was thus a wider Atlantic phenomenon that not only spanned the three centuries of European colonial rule in the Americas but also cut across the boundaries of the various European empires, how did those defined as creoles in the various European imperial realms in the Americas respond to this early modern ideology? What are the historical similarities, as well as the differences, between the notions about creolization as they arose in each of the European empires? How did early modern thinking about creolization in the New World evolve from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century? How did this debate inflect the development of a colonial sense of communal identity, local patriotism, New World nationalism, and literary expression in the various parts of the colonial Americas? Finally, how did it shape the creoles' relation with the European metropolis and place of origin as well as with peoples of non-European origin living in the Americas?

This collection of essays gathers responses to these questions by early Americanists working in Spanish, Portuguese, and Anglo-American colonial literature, in order to explore comparatively the ideological, literary, and scientific constitution of various early modern notions about creolization and forms of creole subjectivity in colonial Latin and British America.³ Examining the literary rec-

2. William Robertson, *The History of the Discovery and Settlement of America* (1777; New York, 1829), 123; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Introduction: The Changing Definition of America," in Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), 1–27, esp. 23.

3. We use the expression "early modern period" to refer to the initial westernization of the Americas from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in purposeful contrast to the general tendency within Latin American historiography and criticism to rely on such concepts as "ancien régime" or "sociedades de antiguo régimen." The idea of an "early modernity" could be quite misleading when applied to Latin America, for it would distort the peculiar and contradictory processes of the region's modernization as compared to the United States or the original Euro-

ord produced by and about creole subjects in the various European imperial realms of Spain, Portugal, and England in the New World, this collection hopes to make a contribution to several continuing discussions. First, it aims to broaden the critical debate about creole subjectivity, which has long held more currency in the literary study of colonial Latin America than in colonial British America. Second, it strives to extend the perspective of literary history to the advances made by modern historians who have called for a fresh look at Euro-American creoles in light of the intensified study of subaltern subjects in the colonial Americas. Third, it means to respond to historians' calls for comparative, hemispheric, and Atlantic perspectives on the study of the colonial Americas that would transcend both modern and early modern national and imperial boundaries. And, finally, it contributes an early American literary perspective to the comparative, hemispheric, or inter-American study of American literatures that has so far concentrated on the national periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this volume, we are happy to bring Luso-, Spanish-, and British-American literature into a comparative focus and hope that it will serve as a model for similar scholarship on colonial French and Dutch literature.⁴

Together, these essays represent a composite overview of the pervasive themes of creolism and creolization in the ideological context of early modern settler colonialism. As such, we trust that this collection will stand as a platform for further research and study in comparative hemispheric as well as Atlantic scholarship, both historical and literary.

Creoles and Creolization: Definitions

Most likely derived from a Latin root (*creare*, to make, to create, that is, something new), the word *creole* made its first appearance in modern Western languages as a Portuguese neologism (*crioulo*) in a colonial New World context—to distinguish black slaves born in Brazil from those brought from Africa. Although *crioulo* slaves were sometimes favorably compared to African-born slaves for already being seasoned in the New World environment and therefore less susceptible to disease, they were more often seen as prone to rebelliousness and moral vice. In the course of its sixteenth-century translation from the Portuguese into the Spanish context, the word *criollo* soon came to designate not only slaves of African descent but also settlers of European

pean imperial model. In this collection, however, “early modern period” will be used only in its chronological sense.

4. On creole subjects in colonial Latin American studies, see the Terminological and Bibliographical Notes at the end of this Introduction.

ancestry born in the Americas. Its earliest documentations in this sense appear in letters written during the 1560s by Spanish officials from New Spain, who observed that the Spanish sector of the colonial population was now “different from that before” because the “creoles, who are those that are born there, . . . have never known the king nor ever hope to know him, and are quick to listen to and believe those who are malintentioned.” Its earliest documentation in print has been traced to the *Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias* (1570), by the royal chronicler Juan López de Velasco, who claimed that the Spaniards born in the Indies, “who are called creoles, turn out like the natives even though they are not mixed with them [by] declining to the disposition of the land.” By the end of the sixteenth century, the American-born creoles had come to be regarded as a distinct group in most regions of the Ibero-American empires who had assumed, as Anthony Pagden has written, a “single, if varied, character” that had acquired “all those supposed shortcomings of the Indians that were thought to derive from psychological weakness or deformation, above all their moral and social instability.”⁵

The alleged change that Spaniards underwent in the Americas was not lost on Spain’s European imperial rivals. The earliest documentation of the word *creole* in English occurs in E. Grimstone’s 1604 translation of José de Acosta’s *Historia natural y moral* (1590), which makes reference to “Crollos” as designating “Spaniards borne at the Indies.” By the end of the seventeenth century, English writers were using the word also in reference to British-American colonials—often to express a “deep skepticism” about the survival of British character among the English progeny born in the Caribbean, Virginia, and New England. But, despite the gradual domestication of the word in the English language, it generally retained a broadly foreign, and a distinctly Ibero-

5. Anthony Pagden, “Identity Formation in Spanish America,” in Nicholas Canny and Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 57, 81. The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega writes during the early seventeenth century that the term “criollo” was first used “in order to . . . distinguish between those blacks born in the Indies and those born in Guinea because the latter are more honest and of better quality, having been born in their native country,” in Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca, *Obras completas del Inca Garcilaso de la Vega*, ed. P. Carmelo Saenz de Santa Maria (Madrid, 1960), I, 281; Lope García de Castro, quoted in Bernard Lavallé, *Las promesas ambiguas: ensayos sobre el criollismo colonial en los Andes* (Lima, 1993), 16–25 (our translation); Juan López de Velasco, *Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias recopiladas por el cosmógrafo-cronista Juan López de Velasco desde el año de 1571 al de 1574* (Madrid, 1894), 37–38. For discussions of the history of the concept of the creole in Spanish America, see José Juan Arrom, *Certidumbre de América: estudios de letras, folklore, y cultura*, 2d ed. (Madrid, 1971), 50–54. On colonial Brazil, see Stuart B. Schwartz, “Colonial Identities and *Sociedade de Castas*,” *Colonial Latin American Review*, IV (1995), 185–201; A. J. R. Russell-Wood, “Centers and Peripheries in the Luso-Brazilian World, 1500–1808,” in Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, eds., *Negotiated Empires: Centers and Peripheries in the Americas, 1500–1800* (New York, 2002), 109–110.

American, connotation until the eighteenth century. This is evident in the spelling of the word in many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English texts, such as Cotton Mather's famous early-eighteenth-century designation of certain behaviors among the colonials by which he found himself surrounded as "*Criolian degeneracies*" (from the Spanish *criollo*, rather than the French *créole*). However, whereas in the Ibero-American context the pejorative connotations of the word had consisted primarily in allegations of a lapse in piety or loyalty to king and country, the particular connotations that the word assumed in the predominantly Protestant context of early British America are still manifest today in one of the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definitions of the verb *to creolize*: "to spend the day in a delectable state of apathy."⁶

Throughout the Americas, then, the word *creole* (and the various vernacular derivations from the Portuguese word *crioulo*) originated during the sixteenth century to designate a person of Old World descent who was born in the Americas, and the idea of creolization usually carried pejorative implications. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the causes for real or perceived changes in Old World bodies and minds in the New World were usually found in a combination of environmental and astrological explanations, which placed a premium not only on the time but also on the place of an individual's birth within the early modern matrix of terrestrial, sublunary, and supralunary constellations. Nevertheless, remarks about the negative influences of the New World environment were then usually qualified by reflections on the efficacy of human moral choice to overcome them.⁷

By contrast, during the eighteenth century, as natural history was increasingly being stripped of its astrological aspects, the significance of the time and place of an individual's birth gradually lost significance relative to the ever-present influences of the natural environment on individuals and entire cultures after birth. Human beings were now seen to be like plants, entirely dependent

6. José de Acosta, *The Natural History of the East and West Indies* (1590), trans. E. G[rimestone] (London, 1604), 278; Carole Shammas, "English-Born and Creole Elites in Turn-of-the-Century Virginia," in Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman, eds., *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), 274–296, esp. 284; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of New England* (Hartford, Conn., 1853–1855), I, 13, 25. On the concept of the "creole" in eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century Anglo America and the Caribbean, see Sean X. Goudie, *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic* (Philadelphia, 2006), esp. 8–9.

7. Thus, Sahagún lamented that, while the "native Indians of old knew how to remedy the damage that this land imprints on those who live in it, obviating natural things with contrary exercises, we let ourselves be carried along by our bad inclinations." Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (1590) (Mexico City, 1938), III, 82.