

# VANISHING CREOLE IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ATLANTIC: THE UNITED STATES, PANAMA, AND THE CARIBBEAN

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*Those strange creole words which, like tropic lizards,  
change color with position* (Hearn 112).

Certain key concepts in the (post)colonial Atlantic change as they traverse regions, languages, empires, and oceans over centuries. Terms such as “pirate”, “renegade”, “neophyte”, “convert”, “captive”, “Creole”, and others undergo trajectories of racialization, ambiguation, demonization as they leave their European language of origins to enter the Anglophone sphere. This is famously the case for the word “Creole”. If the Spanish *criollo* and the Portuguese *crioulo* indicated that something or someone was born in the colonies, the US Anglophone sphere declensed the word “Creole” into a multitude of competing definitions, all of which were intensely, although ambiguously, racialized. In literary works across the American North and the American South, “Creole” became synonymous with the illegibility of blended ancestries, often unleashing waves of uncontrollable interracial desire. In this paper, I will linger on the word “Creole” and its ambiguities in two antebellum works set in the South of the United States: James S. Peacocke’s novel *The Creole Orphans* (1856), and Caroline Norton’s poem “The Creole Girl” (1840). In their travels across the North and South of the US, the Caribbean, and Europe, the titular “Creoles” will encounter a wide spectrum of parallel but dissonant definitions of Creoleness, and of themselves, tinted with varying degrees of racialization. This paper follows the iterations of the word “Creole” in these texts and, marginally, in other similar Creoleness textualities, to showcase the instability of the discourse of Creoleness in the Anglophone Atlantic. I also intend to show how Creole ambiguity, indeterminacy, and shiftiness release a peculiar mystique that often finds expression through a vocabulary of eroticism and interracial desire.

Keywords: Creoleness, Vanishing Creole, Nineteenth-century, Anglophone Atlantic, Ambiguity

## Introduction

«Probably a borrowing from French. Or perhaps a borrowing from Spanish. Or perhaps a borrowing from Portuguese»: the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s defini-

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tion of *Creole* begins on an uncertain note. A Creole may be a «descendant of white European settlers» in a colonized country and «perceived to have no black ancestry», but also «a person of black African descent born in the Caribbean or mainland Americas», or «any person of mixed ancestry born in a country previously colonized by white Europeans» (*OED*, s. p.). To be fair, the *OED* does complicate each of these definitions, but this puzzling variety points to two things that will guide the pages to follow. First, that any definition intending to do justice to (hi)stories of Creoleness in the US and the Circumcaribbean region must be fluid, mindful of contradictions, and open to incongruities. Second, that Creoleness always appears in combination with racial ambiguity<sup>1</sup>.

The notion of “Creoleness”—where Guyanese author Wilson Harris sees the genesis of the South American and Caribbean imagination (23)—and its divergent trajectories show the interconnectedness of the Southern United States, the Isthmus, and the Caribbean. For centuries, discussions on Creoleness have interrogated the interlocked issues of citizenship, Americanness by birth, and blended racial ancestries. Often, however, they have also vehicled white supremacy and facilitated the erasure of Blackness. In the Caribbean, Creoleness came to indicate mixed and partly untraceable ancestries, an «interplay of European and African elements» (Benitez-Rojo 54), a «métissage without limits» (Glissant 46). This approach will later bloom into Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant’s manifesto “Éloge de la Créolité”. An exception to this trajectory can be found in Louisiana and Panama, which share, in the words of Lorna Williams, an «anomalous status» (14). In the following pages, I intend to show some of the semantic and geographical trajectories taken by the word “Creole” and its related constellations of racialized values: my analysis will start in Louisiana, travel to Martinique, follow the transatlantic itinerary of a “West Indian” Creole girl, and touch upon Panamanian echoes. This article will lay special focus on the Louisianan context, which is this author’s area of expertise, but it will nod to a transatlantic dimension and allude to the Isthmic cultural area to signal the presence of research avenues that may compare Creole identity formations in contiguous colonial and postcolonial contexts. Fruitful bridges can be thrown, for example, between the historical trajectories of Creoleness and Panameñidad until their programmatic expression in “Éloge de la Créolité” and Fortune’s “Los Elementos Humanos de Panamá” respectively. Both concepts are predicated on ancestry as well as on slippages and ambiguities, and are mindful of racial entanglements. Both appear to be “relación[es] de pertenencia” to a space by virtue of birth, but both express an awareness that identity “no puede depender

1 For studies of Creoleness that include accurate and extensive definitions, see Garraway, Mido-Hall, Berlin, and Eble.

única y exclusivamente de la tierra en donde se nació” (cannot solely and exclusively depend on the country one was born in) (Fortune, “Elementos” 398).

Coherently with the racial instability of the term, discussions of race in literature of Creoleness throughout the Americas are highly ambiguous: as the word travels across the entire racial spectrum so do Creole identities. Contradictory definitions, characters being pronounced both Creole and non-Creole at different stages, and characters entertaining opposite notions of Creoleness are prominent in James S. Peacocke’s novel *The Creole Orphans*, published in New York in 1856, but set between Louisiana and Martinique in the antebellum period. The secrecy that wrapped out-of-wedlock interracial unions and cases of racial passing also contributed to the poetic of silences and lacunae that marks text of Creoleness such as Caroline Sheridan Norton’s poem “The Creole Girl” (London 1840). Close readings of these two texts will prove that the Creole—a central trope to Atlantic and Interamerican literatures—appears in combination with thick semantics of ambiguity that obscure and confound their racial affiliations. This textual and identitarian illegibility contributes to a more specific formation which I take the liberty to term the *vanishing Creole*.

## Vanishing Creoles

Although figures of Creoleness are often coalesced with the trope of the “tragic mulatto / mulatta”, the Louisianan and Caribbean settings allow some room for more geographically and culturally specific variations on this theme. This trope, in fact, is only partially useful to explain the trajectories of the protagonists of “The Creole Girl” and *Creole Orphans*. The mixed-race characters involved do encounter tragic deaths, but these deaths are adumbrated by subtler ones, an apparatus of microscopic erasures that cause these characters to slowly fade from the plot. The vanishing of the Creole is an intermittence, a dwelling in ambiguity, rather than an abrupt departure. In this sense, the vanishing Creole shows more points of contact with the myth of the “vanishing Indian”<sup>2</sup>, whose extinction was often narrated as a slow and noiseless withering, like «the mist rising. The morning dew dissipating in the heat of the day. The setting sun. The ocean’s all-consuming waves» (Dippie 15).

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2 The vanishing Indian myth is founded on the demographical decline suffered by Native populations throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, caused by the continued aggression, extermination, and expropriation of Native societies, and exacerbated by the consequences of the Indian Removal Act in 1830.

Similar to the theme of the “vanishing Indian” in nineteenth-century white-authored literature, the sense of a “vanishing Creole culture” is a pervasive force in much nineteenth-century Louisiana literature. The dynamics of contested sovereignty and racial polarization unleashed by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 reverberate strangely in nineteenth century and especially post-Canal Panama (1914), which, in turn, also give rise to a poetics of racial elisions and silences. The post-Purchase process of Americanization in Louisiana and the dual racial order it enforced brought an end to the region’s French colonial dominion and racially fluid society (Cossé Bell 7; Davis 192; Kein 281): much to the detriment of Louisiana’s Francophone and Francophile culture. The Creoles of color, who had had enjoyed access to wealth and freedom, found themselves at odds within a new order that distributed personhood along racial lines. Their rights continued to be eroded throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction, until *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in 1896, «legally dismantled the free colored class» (Kein 131). Even the white Francophone élites in Louisiana lost their cultural primate to the advancement of an Anglo-American order. Most significantly, the new American order in Louisiana and the US’s de facto colonization of Panama (Williams 15), on top of older, layered processes of creolization and migration, caused an array of racial polarizations. In Panama, the US-imposed racial hierarchy based on the “one drop rule” contradicted Latin American models that distributed Blackness according to outer appearance (Balutansky and Sourieau 7). The racially tripartite society of Louisiana, where free people of color occupied a middle ground between free whites and enslaved people of color, was forced into a racial dualism of Blackness and whiteness, where the latter lay exclusive claims to “Creoleness”, and the former had to defend their participation in it. These circumstances triggered a dispute over “Creoleness” as a category that served the «obsession with linear origins, and especially with ‘being’ as a stable category of integrity and purity» (Balutansky and Sourieau 3). These controversies, and the sense of an ending typical of the post-Purchase era, find expression in the pages of Creoleness literature and sediment in the vanishing Creole trope.

Creolization in Panama is intimately tied with processes of vanishing. Panamanian author Carlos Guillermo Wilson laments that much of Panama identity revolves around the racist imperative of whitening the race, and, as a consequence, pivots on erasure. In spite of its transformative and hybridizing impetus, creolization in countries such as Panama has set in motion processes of rejection and denial, concealing and avoidance. Some aspects of creolization in Panama, Wilson writes, have as their sole goal to erase the African heritage, in an active effort to “vanish” traces of visible African ancestry from skin and discourse (Wilson 41; see also Lipski). This erasure is performed both in whitening language and practices that obscure Black ancestry or privilege light-skinned partners,

or in the hatred of ethnic groups who allegedly found no ways into (partial) whiteness. The African Panamanian population is notoriously divided into two groups, the Catholic, Hispanophone “Afro-colonials” (Lipski 411) or “colonial Blacks” (Wilson 40), to trace their ancestry back to of African slaves allegedly descended from conquistador Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, and the Anglophone or Francophone “Afro-Antilleans” (Lipski 411), who emigrated to Panama much later from Caribbean regions (Wilson 40). The latter group is severely marginalized and blamed to have «failed to participate sufficiently in the process of ethnic whitening ... or to put it more frankly, to erase all that is African» (Wilson 41; emphasis added). Armando Fortune virtually agrees with Wilson when he writes that Blackness is an essential component of Panameñidad, but also one that was purposefully neglected: «parecía que nadie lo quería estudiar; más bien se quería ocultar; y que hasta el mismo negro, y especialmente el mulato, querían olvidarse de sí mismo» (it seemed that no one wanted to study him; rather, he wanted to hide; and that even the Negro himself, and especially the mulatto, wanted to forget about himself) and, quoting Fernando Ortiz, Fortune calls this a «a very sad self-denigration phenomenon» (Fortune in Pulido Ritter 86). Blacks and “Mulattos” in Panama meet the same fate of American Creoles of color and “Mulattos” (and Native Americans) in their respective countries: they vanish to make room for white-supremacist and Eurocentric identity constructions.

### **Wish You Were Dead: Caroline S. Norton’s “The Creole Girl”**

The meticulous elision of race from Caroline Sheridan Norton’s “The Creole Girl” marks race as the poem’s absent center (Robinson 298; Punter 263) and activates the mechanism of textual and identitarian erasure at the heart of the vanishing Creole. The poem relies on a periphrastic vocabulary that erases skin color from the surface of the text, dodges racializing categories, and resorts to polysemous adjectives that bridge the racial and the psychological, camouflaging race behind a sort of inherited melancholy. Carolyn Vellenga Berman notes that, in early nineteenth-century England, Creole is not a racial denomination but a colonial one, indicative of a person’s American birth, but not of his or her racial or ethnic background: it encompassed «all kinds of individuals born and raised in the European slave colonies» (9). This makes Norton’s opaque racial vocabulary all the more striking, since the girl may or may not be of mixed racial heritage. Her mother, in fact, is a «fair West Indian» (86) who derives her racial indeterminacy from the notorious polysemy of the word *fair* (beautiful or fair-skinned). Similar to those of many literary women of blended ancestry, the girl’s origins are «obscure, obscene (and therefore unseen)» (Brody 16). “The Creole

Girl” is the (most likely) mixed-race, out-of-wedlock progeny of a West Indian woman and a British nobleman, born in the colonies and sent to live and die in England. Race is the real site of ambiguity in the poem: it appears as elision, as periphrasis, and as implication. This negation of race is typical of Latin American countries, Panama in particular, where Black nineteenth-century poets erased race from their work in favor of satiric and political issues and to the detriment of personal concerns. Here, the reason for the vanishing of race is to be found, according to Sonja Stephenson Watson, in the precedence of nation building over racialized discourses. The reason for the silencing of Blackness in “The Creole Girl”—which, it is worth noting, is the work of a white British author—are not easily explained: it is certainly a sign of what the author may interpret as tactful reserve on the girl’s indecent past. But the unspoken race of the girl and the erased body of her mother are testimonies to the unspeakable, taboo quality of miscegenation, its simultaneous impropriety and topicality as poetic matter.

Norton’s unnamed “Creole” girl follows her father to England. The whereabouts of her mother are unknown. The girl suffers and withers away, as her biology is designed for warmer climates and the color of her skin condemns her to isolation. Although the speaker lingers on botanical imagery of plants or flowers transplanted and wilting on the wrong soil, he never speaks of her race except via metaphors that mask the color of her skin. The most interesting placeholder for race is the recurrent use of the semantic field of shadows, where the word’s double meaning conjoins the levels of inner and outer darkness. «Cruel were they who flung that heavy shade / Across the life whose days did but begin» (86). In this case, the «heavy shade / Across the life» (86) of the Creole girl projects an ambiguity that makes dark skin visible right beneath the metaphoric surface of a dark future. The speaker blames the girl’s parents, who irresponsibly condemned her to the impossible future of the single-parented, illegitimate (and mixed-race) child. The trope of Blackness as shadow is not uncommon in Caribbean and Isthmic poetics of Blackness. It reappears, for example, in the poem “Nieblas”, by nineteenth-century Panamanian author Federico Escobar, «¡Negro nació! ¡La noche aterradora / transmitió su dolor sobre mi cara» (I was born Black! The terrifying night / shed her pain on my face; Escobar in Miró 65). Race falls on children of color, whose life «did but begin», like the wings of night on their cradle: «la noche con su oscuro manto / logró cubrir mi cuerpo aun en la cuna» (the night with her dark cloak / covered my body while still in the cradle; Escobar in Miró 65). “Nieblas” and “The Creole Girl” also share associations of Blackness with innocence, and whiteness with lasciviousness. If the Black body is conjoined with a virtuous and luminous soul, white skin may demand associations to nobility, but it is prone to vice: «¿Qué importa que haya

seres que se jacten / de nobles porque tienen noble sangre / si practican el vicio» (So what, if some pride themselves / of being noble because they have noble blood / if they indulge in vice? Escobar in Miró 65). Along similar lines, Norton juxtaposes the Creole girl's innocence to her white father's reckless libertinism.

Predictably, the girl encounters a «piteous end» (99): in spite of his demonstrative empathy, the narrator insists on the hopelessness of the Creole girl's situation and the lack of viable options other than a dramatic death. This makes Norton's Creole girl a vanishing Creole, and one comparable to Spivak's «native female» (“Three Women's Texts” 245): a signifier within and a tool of discourse, unable to articulate her position, and excluded from any share in shaping emerging norms. Placed in an uninhabitable grey area, the girl is «an alien 'mid the ever-moving crowd, / A wandering stranger, nameless and unknown» (88). In this light, she is fully representative of Creoleness in British fiction—«almost always», Vallenga Berman writes, «the Creole is an alien (or half-alien) to the community» (3)—and also fully representative of *vanishing* Creoleness: she is simultaneously present and absent, occupying space and yet invisible. Not finding better ways to protect her, the speaker wishes she would just disappear: she is better off dead than alive on these shores. The “tragic mulatto / mulatta” is brought to their demise by the intrinsic cruelty of race dynamics that brutalized familial and natural attachments, exposing mixed-race characters to impossibly unbearable pain; the vanishing Creole, at least in this instance, is similarly vanquished by the impracticability of her social positioning. Following the narrator's logic, she dies because she is an unsuccessful transplant into an inappropriate soil, but mainly because she is an existential impossibility.

### **Which Creole? James S. Peacocke's *Creole Orphans***

Charles Ormond, a wealthy white man, rescues an enslaved girl from dubious bidders at an auction. The girl, whose name is Marie, will become his companion for many years to come and give him two daughters. At the beginning of the novel, the couple is still unmarried because of Louisianan anti-miscegenation laws and Charles's reluctance to compromise his family lineage by marrying a woman of color. But both partners worry about the fate of Marie and their two children in case of Charles's death. Charles has never officially manumitted Marie and, according to American enslavement law, the children follow the mother's condition<sup>3</sup>. As a result, both Marie and her daughters are still enslaved and cannot inherit property. They are, to the contrary, to be inherited *as* property.

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<sup>3</sup> On the precept of *partum sequitur ventrem* in the *Code Noir*, see Curran (2011: 56); and Ivonne M. García in Castillo Street (2006: 163).

I would like to turn my reader's attention to the novel's contradictory uses of the word "Creole". The author addresses the term's different understandings across regions in a short dialogue that provides a working definition of "Creole" for the purposes of the novel: «a native descended from European ancestors» (91). Yet, the narrator uses Creoleness much more unpredictably, conjuring a considerable haze of confusion around it. At the end of the novel, Creoleness becomes something similar to the way Afro-Panamanian journalist and economist Armando Fortune describes *panameñidad*: «es condición del alma, del espíritu; es complejo de sentimientos, ideas y actitudes» (a condition of the soul, of the spirit; a complex of feelings, ideas, and attitudes, 294)<sup>4</sup>. In the same way, Creoleness is a state of mind, a feeling for the land, or simply the fortuitous involvement in the life and culture of Louisiana, with its specific dilemmas of disputed heirloom, forbidden attachments, and racial entanglements. The novel illustrates the level of diversification the term had gained in the mid-nineteenth century and builds upon the term's nebulous semantics.

Racial ambiguities gather most densely around Marie. She is introduced as a Martinican «Quadroon» at the incipit of the novel, or rather «this was the story which Ormond had ever believed as told by Marie» (12). This way, the novel sets the stage for what Werner Sollors via Ratna Roy calls «mulatto-proved-white», a situation in which «an interracial romance [...] would turn out to be an intraracial one» (6). Marie was consensually assumed to be mixed-race because her «aunt», supposedly her late mother's sister, was mixed-race herself. The turning point that rewrites Marie's racial identity happens halfway through the novel, when Charles and Marie travel to Martinique and come into possession of Marie's family papers. The papers and the clarificatory tale that goes with them reveal that Marie's «aunt» was merely a friend of Marie's father who claimed to be a relative hoping to lay hands on Marie's property. On her deathbed, she reveals that Marie's mother was a «Creole girl, by the name of Marie St. Valle» (177). This news puts Ormond in a triumphant mood—he is relieved that the mother of his children «had parents to whom she could look back without shame—with pride» (177).

A closer reading, however, will inevitably spoil the enthusiasm. In this case, disambiguation relies on the meaning ascribed to Marie's mother's "Creoleness", which Charles assumes to be synonymous with European whiteness (177). To the reader's puzzlement, Marie's fake aunt is also a "Creole": Charles calls her «an old Creole woman named De Lange, who was Marie's aunt» (168). In this

4 Cf. Fernando Ortiz, "Los Factores Humanos de la Cubanidad" (1940), which appears to be the generative text for Fortune's "Los Elementos Humanos de Panamá y su Aporte a la Panameñidad."



case, the word means that the woman is mixed-race, as Ormond knows her to be. What is more, two possibly different Creoles appear side by side in that very same sentence, as Charles inquires «of an aged *Creole* at the market, if he remembered the person of an old *Creole* woman named De Lange, who was Marie's aunt» (168; emphasis added). If in this case one knows for a fact that the latter Creole means mixed-race, one cannot be sure about the former.

In order to suspend disbelief about the disambiguating power of these family papers and of the aunt's story, one has to acknowledge that the word "Creole" has two (or more) opposite meanings and live with this contradiction. In addition, Marie's supposed whiteness is in open contrasts with remarks made throughout the novel regarding her supposed Blackness: Marie's complexion, according to narrator, «*plainly told* that she *might* have a tinge of African blood», although «far removed» (12; emphasis added). The flawed logic of «plainly» indicating that something «might» be the case is self-evident, but even if one is willing to overlook this detail, either does the narrator's comment invalidate Marie's whiteness as shown in her family papers, or vice versa. In either case, in Martinique one of the two Mariés *vanishes*.

It is not that the novel does not believe in its own definition of Creoleness, but it plays with its limitations. Doctor Grant, «a Creole», is a «real hot-blooded Southerner [...] a true specimen of an intelligent, high-minded, pure Louisianan» (22): given these credentials and his dislike of abolitionists, he is probably white. Marie's aunt, equally a Creole, is a woman of color and a native of Martinique, not of Louisiana. The «yellow Creole boy, about thirteen years old» who «knows every turn in the swamp, every crook in the bayou, and every hole in the lake» (32) is probably not. A Northerner, daydreaming of Marie's daughters, calls them «Creole», and his interlocutor redefines them through a more explicit racial slur (184). A «*Creole of Jerusalem*», in italics in the text, makes his appearance towards the end of the novel. In his case the use of italics denotes an ironical use of the term, and gestures at this very Creole's foreignness. By the time the reader gets to see the company of travelers on Marie and Charles' ship to Martinique, they have no way to know what the «young and agreeable Creole gentlemen» (140) may look like or be a native of.

In *Creole Orphans*, Creoles vanish in different ways. First, Marie's identity as a woman of color vanishes as soon as her family papers resurface to prove her whiteness, although not beyond reasonable doubt. Second, the events in the novel are triggered by the Creole couple's awareness of the possibility of their own deaths, which inevitably come to pass. The precariousness of Creole lives, especially Marie's, serves as a metonymy for the slippery para-legal system around interracial unions in the colonial and postcolonial American South, for the ways property could be legitimately transferred, personhood granted, and

freedom maintained in a society that was about to build insurmountable barricades between enslaved Blacks and free whites. These identitarian and societal ambiguities around Creoleness are conveyed by clusters of textual ambiguities. Third, and most importantly, “Creole” is a concept that vanishes in the reader’s hand as soon as they thought they had it. Filling this empty structure of a word would be beside the point, since the point lies precisely in its oscillations, elisions, and polysemies. It would do more justice to the novel’s complexity to understand the word “Creole”, in line with its racial attributes, as vacant and plural.

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