"Roots beyond Roots": Heteroglossia and Feminist Creolization in Myal and Crossing the Mangrove

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“Roots beyond Roots”:
Heteroglossia and Feminist Creolization in *Myal* and *Crossing the Mangrove*

Heather Smyth

A continual preoccupation in Caribbean literary criticism has been the creolization of culture and language. Each linguistic region has developed theories and models that both account for cultural mixing and also extend beyond description to offer visions of the cross-cultural possibilities for resistance and creativity offered by diverse cultural matrices. This body of work includes, among others, Wilson Harris’s study of syncretism; Édouard Glissant’s *Antillanité*; the créolité of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant; Antonio Benítez Rojo’s *The Repeating Island*; and Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s work on creolization.¹ Each articulation refers to a specific cultural

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and historical moment, and each has the potential for very different trajectories and ranges of scrutiny. A feature shared by all these theoretical models, though, is a belief in the liberatory dynamic of creolization: “creolization becomes a power for reversing the processes of acculturation (or assimilation), deculturation, discontinuity, and marginalization that have affected the entire Caribbean.”² In many ways, these theories stand as the dominant modes for speaking of “difference” in the Caribbean and are drawn upon for explanations of social diversity. However, models such as these look primarily to cultural, “racial,” and linguistic differences as the factors significant in creolization and rarely include differences of gender and sexuality as key aspects of Caribbean heterogeneity.

The absence of gender and sexuality as terms in creolization is substantive: theories of creolization are often deeply marked by gender and sexual ideologies, as A. James Arnold notes of the Martiniquan créolistes Chamoiseau, Confi ant, and Bernabé and their reliance on heterosexual eroticism and masculinist images of Antillean culture and history.³ As well, the “racial” mixing that illustrates the process of creolization has historically been a scene of sexual violence against women, as Vera Kutzinski notes of Cuban mestizaje: “mestizaje becomes legitimated as an exclusively male project or achievement in which interracial, heterosexual rape can be refigured as a fraternal embrace across [color lines] and, significantly, across a female body absented by rape.”⁴ And the fact that, as Robert Young puts it, “hybridity as a cultural description will always carry with it an implicit politics of heterosexuality” draws attention to the exclusion of alternative sexualities from both the popular and theoretical call to diversity in the Caribbean.⁵ Despite the different histories and cultural contexts that shape models of cultural “mixing,” these elisions and prejudices appear to be shared across a range of theories of difference.

Criticism of Caribbean women’s writing has paid too little attention to the myriad ways in which Caribbean women writers respond to existing theories of creolization when, in fact, these women have responded with a critique of the absence of gender and sexuality in creolization theories and with the development of new, specifically feminist,

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modes of speaking of Caribbean difference. Caribbean women’s work on diversity in the Caribbean, taking into account social marginalization in its many forms, must be viewed as truly interventionist in the field of creolization theories, for it expresses creolization, often, through a feminist politics of difference that has social change or critique of the status quo as one of its primary goals. By “feminist politics of difference,” I refer to a feminist critical practice that is marked both by an integrated analysis of the multiple and interlocking systems of women’s oppression and by a sense of “the feminist subject as . . . highly differentiated.” Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for example, suggests that “third world women’s writings on feminism have consistently focused on . . . the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism.” The issue here, as Michèle Barrett clarifies, is not so much difference as power. A “feminist politics of difference” is based not on pluralism or simple acceptance of differences between women but rather on addressing issues of privilege and status whereby some women are empowered through others’ marginalization. As Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson note, “it is not only that there are differences between different groups of women but that these differences are often also conflicts of interest.”

Erna Brodber’s *Myal* and Maryse Condé’s *Crossing the Mangrove (Traversée de la mangrove)* are particularly valuable texts to read in establishing the possible parameters of feminist creolization. Brodber and Condé demonstrate creolization in process through

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narrative ethics of collectivity and an emphasis on partiality, dialogism, openness, and repetition. Moreover, their novels address existing understandings of creolization more directly than do many other Caribbean feminist texts. Myal epitomizes, and yet rereads, Wilson Harris’s ideas of the healing propensities of syncretic resources; Crossing the Mangrove critiques and deflates the créolité of Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confi ant. The novels seem to differ in their optimism about the potentials for creolized Caribbean culture but come together in a pedagogical approach to exploring these potentials. The discussion of both Myal and Crossing the Mangrove will focus most closely on forms of narration and structure, for it is through Brodber’s and Condé’s representations of multiple narration and community that feminist theories of creolization and diversity are most fully articulated in each text.

Erna Brodber, like many Caribbean women writers, seeks to link her work on gender, race, and diversity with movements toward social change. As she states in an essay, “My sociological effort and therefore the fiction that serves it . . . has activist intentions.”¹² Myal participates in this project by illustrating how heterogeneous community can provide the cultural and spiritual resources to transform social and psychic rupture into political revolution. Brodber creates in Myal a focused demonstration of syncretic resources through an emphasis on partiality, multiplicity, liminal cross-cultural spaces, and a pedagogy of resistance. In this, she illustrates a vision of syncretism that resembles in many aspects that of Wilson Harris, who posits that the creative rejuvenation of heterogeneous community rediscovering its own sedimented cultural resources can heal the wounds of violent and exploitative colonization.

Wilson Harris argues that syncretism describes the heterogeneous imperative that is in all societies and cultures, but that is denied in acts of conquest and the enforcement of homogeneity. He sees in the Caribbean’s violent past a wealth of mythologies and resources that carry the seeds of their own transformation into a creative and heterogeneous future: “We are beginning to accept certain possibilities akin to the essential character of space, a phenomenon which subsists upon its very losses, the transubstantiation of consciousness. . . . Something endures at the heart of catastrophe or change which runs to meet one like a feature of unpredictable unity with and through a phenomenal nature one cannot absolutely grasp.”¹³ Catastrophe and conquest must be “digested”

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and “infinitely rehearsed” toward an uncertain but idealistic future of community, in which “a capacity exists to begin to transform claustrophobic ritual by cross-cultural imaginations.”¹⁴ Harris’s work is provocative because of the saving role he gives to the “phenomenon of otherness” and the “life of heterogeneity”:

The paradox of cultural heterogeneity, or cross-cultural capacity, lies in the evolutionary thrust it restores to orders of the imagination, the ceaseless dialogue it inserts between hardened conventions and eclipsed or half-eclipsed otherness, within an intuitive self that moves endlessly into flexible patterns, arcs or bridges of community.¹⁵

His syncretism avoids the polarization of roles of exploiter and exploited, for he is confident of the “capacity for genuine change.”¹⁶ The question does arise, however, of how to read in Harris’s syncretism (in his critical and fictional work) a place for feminist critique. The symbolic role of woman as “muse” in Harris’s highly allegorical fiction has been investigated by critics such as Joyce Sparer Adler and Kerry Johnson. Johnson, for one, maintains that in Harris’s novels “gender is an example of the dichotomous ‘contrasting spaces’ that need to be undone if true freedom can occur.”¹⁷

The following discussion of Erna Brodber’s Myal rereads Harris’s syncretism through feminist critique and an investigation of the “contrasting spaces” of gender. Brodber stages her exploration of syncretism and communal crisis through a representation of the sexual exploitation of women and in the context of historical political crises in Jamaica. Brodber, like Harris, shows that monolithic discourses silence differences and are therefore creatively incapacitated. Focusing on differences, however, does not lead in Myal to polarized cultural imperatives, to a Manichean opposition of African and European roots and resources, or to a valorizing of “authentic” cultural legacies. Brodber demonstrates what Harris elsewhere calls an awareness of “roots beyond roots,” a sense that “all images (or institutions or rituals) are partial, are ceaselessly unfinished in their openness to other partial images from apparently strange cultures.”¹⁸

Myal parallels Harris’s model of catastrophe and renewal in that it is structured around the political, economic, spiritual, and cultural violence of colonial annexation

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15. Ibid., xviii.
and control of Jamaica. The novel represents this violence as spirit thievery or zombification, and its ravages at the level of nation and community are marked symbolically on the bodies of two women. Anita is the victim of obeah, because Mass Levi uses a “dolly baby” stuck with a nail to steal her spirit and boost his waning potency. Ella, a “half black, half white” woman, is victimized by her American husband Selwyn, who sees her as a “doll” that he can “animate” and steal stories (her soul) from for commercial purposes. She becomes a bridge for his imaginative colonization of her community, and is also a victim of the “obeah” of colonial education: she is, in a sense, possessed by Kipling when she recites his poetry out loud, for “the words were the words of Kipling but the voice was that of Ella O’Grady” (5–6).

Like many other Caribbean women writers, Brodber posits a simultaneity of oppressions, using the theme of spirit thievery to represent racial and sexual domination as well as class stratification and colonization. Using two female protagonists to illustrate the central cases of spirit thievery keeps gender at the forefront of her use of syncretic resources to “cure” those dispossessed by spirit thievery and shows the connections between patriarchy and imperialism. Mass Levi’s spiritual possession of Anita takes the form of rape, as the dolly baby with “knife marks where her legs meet” attests (75). Mass Levi’s sexual exploitation is a show of force that also marks his interactions with other members of the community as a man of wealth. Further, as Shalini Puri points out, Anita’s protest to her unknown possessor to “let me go” (74) echoes Reverend Simpson’s song of resistance “Let my people go” (36): “The stoning of Anita thus resonates with colonial domination and also sets the tone for the violence of sexual relations between men and women in the novel.”¹⁹ Brodber also indicates that when the English Maydene Brassington becomes the myal figure White Hen, she becomes her own person, not simply a “second” to her minister husband; he realizes this when he looks at her and sees that “his wife was thinking. Her own thoughts. Her spirit was not there at ready waiting to take his orders” (89). Maydene, Ella, and Miss Gatha, head of the tabernacle, take leadership roles in healing the community and, as Neil ten Kortenaar points out, in Myal “it is women who are at the dangerous interface between the community and its enemies,” who are taking the most public role.²⁰

The crux of the novel is the way diverse members of the community marshal their resources to heal both girls and, in turn, to imagine new ways to resist the continuing

psychic and material violence of colonization and neocolonialism. The medium for the
healing of the two women—the religion of myalism—brings together images of resis-
tance and heterogeneity. Colette Maximin points out that during the nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries in Jamaica, rural Jamaicans “created new forms of religion”
that aided in their political resistance: “the Caribbean masses were able to fight back by
using distinctive cultural tools.”²¹ Myalism is one of these syncretic forms of religion,
rooted in African traditions but responsive to the creolized demands of the Caribbean.
Myalism is considered curative magic or healing, countering obeah’s malign manipula-
tion of spiritual forces.²² It involves spiritual possession but can also be used to relieve
possession. Barry Chevannes, in Rastafari Roots and Ideology, suggests that myalism
was able to “refashion the symbols and teachings of Christianity into its own image, to
snatch the ‘Christian message from the messenger.’”²³ Notably, Chevannes points out
that since the Baptist missionaries would not sanction myalism, Jamaican people found
a way to have “formal membership in the nonconformist denominations but informal
participation in Myal,” a practice that allowed them to “forge an identity and a culture
by subversive participation in the wider society.” This practice became known as “dual
membership,”²⁴ a term that resonates with the novel Myal’s sense of characters’ partici-
pation in different modes of spiritualism and resistance.²⁵

The myal team that comes together in Brodber’s novel draws from this history of the
religion and also changes it in significant ways. Her representation of myal highlights
the extent to which the religion uses collective efforts to combat obeah, but her novel
goes further in representing this group as necessarily including a transplanted English
woman, Mydene Brassington. Each of the myal figures has a “dual membership” in
the community: Dan, Willie, Perce, Mother Hen, and White Hen are, respectively,
Reverend Simpson, the Baptist minister; the necromancer Ole African; Mass Cyrus, the
myalman; Miss Gatha, the leader of a Kumina tabernacle; and Mydene Brassington,

22. Joseph Murphy distinguishes between obeah and myal by explaining that obeah “reflect[s] the disintegrative
forces of a society under stress” while myal “might be seen as a force for social integration, bent on the exposure
of obeah and defusing it with the power of communal values.” See Joseph Murphy, Working the Spirit (Boston:
24. Ibid., 20–21.
25. Brodber’s location and time period for the novel also focus her project of representing resistance: Grove Town’s
location near Morant Bay evokes the legacy of the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, and Kamau Brathwaite, in
fact, cites an “‘outbreak’ of myalism on the eve of the Morant Bay Rebellion.” See Brathwaite, Contradictory
Omens, 31.
English wife of the Jamaican-born Methodist parson. If, as Maximin argues, “[religious] denominations are symbolic of status and class” in *Myal*, as a reflection of the stratification of churches and classes in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jamaica,²⁶ then the collaboration between the members of these different religions is especially a sign of heterogeneous community healing itself by creolized methods. At the time of Anita’s healing, each of the myal characters performs synchronized but separate rituals: Miss Gatha gathers her followers at the tabernacle, Reverend Simpson prays inside his church, and Maydene prays in her home. These different strategies are also valued in *Myal* as constituent parts of communal action against the larger spirit thievery of colonialism. Willie counsels Dan to “get in their books and know their truth,” but, as Dan points out, Willie does not do this: he lives in the “wilderness . . . not learning their ways,” and Perce is “stuck in some grove talking to snails,” leaving Dan “alone in this Egypt” (67). “Some have to root, man,” Willie tells him—he and Perce are “the hills and the trees,” a way of knowing the land that is “step number one” to Dan’s intervention of challenging images and representations (67–68).

The scene in which Ole African/Willie and Maydene first have contact particularly reveals this hybrid channeling of resources. Ole African, a “scarecrow high in the air walking as if on two roots of sugar cane” (40) represents the anancy stiltman, the trickster who proposes the riddle “the half has never been told” (40). When Maydene sees him, she drops to her knees and prays for “the armoury for spiritual warfare”—she “pull[s] all the power she could find from inside of her and anywhere else with which she was in touch” (56). Ole African on his stilts and Maydene crouched on the ground, I argue, recall the twin figures of the limbo dance. Wilson Harris has noted that in limbo performances in Guyana “some of the performers danced on high stilts like elongated limbs while others performed spread-eagled on the ground. In this way *limbo* spider and stilted pole of the gods were related to the drums like grassroots and branches of lightning to the sound of thunder.”²⁷ Joyce Jonas, in her study of the counterdiscursive energy of anancy, identifies this limbo dance as “a symbolic reassembling of the dismembered god—a celebration of survival . . . a creative accommodation to the change in fortune.”²⁸ The twin figures of Ole African and Maydene together comprise this creative accommodation. Limbo is a uniquely powerful example of the cross-cultural and syncretic energies of the Caribbean: it is not “the total recall of an African past” because

of the “eclipse” of “tribal sovereignties” that occurred after the Middle Passage but is rather “the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures.”²⁹ Harris argues the following: “This ground of accommodation, this art of creative coexistence born of great peril and strangest capacity for renewal—pointing away from apartheid and ghetto fixations—is of the utmost importance and native to the Caribbean, perhaps to the Americas as a whole.”³⁰ Brodber’s use of the limbo image, viewed this way through Harris’s work, crystallizes her project of replacing Manichean resistance with creative syncretic energies. The teamwork of Ole African and Maydene gains more resonance once it is clear that the image of their collaboration is itself a spiritual symbol of cross-cultural renewal.

The teamwork in the myal group is not without its conflicts, however, for as Joyce Walker-Johnson notes, Reverend Simpson/Dan “recognizes . . . the necessity to get to ‘the centre of things’ before Maydene Brassington,”³¹ even though he eventually sees that she can make a contribution. Walker-Johnson proposes that as a representative of “the vanguard of the political changes” in Jamaica, Dan must play a more central role than the English Maydene.³² In the context of the musical motif of the novel, Maydene is dissonant in the community, for she oversteps social niceties in her headlong effort to understand; Simpson “did not know how to play her” (77). As one of the novel’s clearest representatives of English colonial subjectivity, she inevitably troubles the Afro-Jamaican position of resistance in the myal group. Simpson’s hesitation and distrust of Maydene is an important caution against the potentially paternalistic or neocolonial aspects of her involvement. Yet Maydene resists her role as the symbol of English Methodist womanhood, set for her by a Jamaican husband who is clearly more of a “spirit thief” than she, and also, as Catherine Nelson-McDermott suggests, “refuses the position of the sympathetic outsider.”³³ Brodber’s decision to include Maydene in the group of healers indicates a commitment to heterogeneity that challenges the Manichean binaries of victim-victimizer. As Amy Holness notes of Maydene, “you never know who is going to set the balance right” (26). Her role is that of both contributor and conduit—she helps with the healing, but can also take the message of myal to her husband who, as a

³⁰. Ibid., 27.
³². Ibid., 61.
Methodist pastor and as one of the literate “new people” (109), can contribute by chang-
ing things from the inside.

*Myal* emphasizes multiplicity, “the meeting of unlikes” (15), and partiality as con-
stitutive of her vision of syncretism. The novel suggests that communal interpretation of
an event can yield more valuable results than a single reading. A phrase that is frequently
mentioned in the text is “the half has never been told.” Not only does this phrase caution
against interpretive closure but the meaning of the phrase is also variously interpreted by
each of the characters in the novel: Dan thinks it means “there are other things to come”
(41); to Ella, it means that “the turmoil in Grove Town had not ended” when the rocks
stop falling on Anita’s roof (56); to Euphemia, Anita’s mother, it means the stone-throw-
ing “could happen again” (63); and to Dan and Willie, it refers to future resistance, to
“planning a strategy. To beat back those spirit thieves and make our way home” (67).
The phrase is particularly relevant when Ella cannot tell Selwyn “the half” of what hap-
pened to Anita because “she did not know it” (56). There are “some parts missing” to her
story (56), but the details of the event are assembled with reference to the perspectives
of other characters. Diverse strategies and perspectives are therefore necessary, as is the
recognition that knowledge is always partial: change and healing occur as “one little
coral on top of one little coral finally ma[kes] a firm rock” (110).

As an indication of this partiality of knowledge, the narrator is not omniscient but
rather appears to be a member of the community. Gossip is a form of community knowl-
dge and information-sharing in *Myal*, and gossip and “silly linguistic rituals” (21) play
a large part in the narration. When Maydene decides that she wants to take care of Ella,
“the news winked about” from Maydene to Cook to Coachman to Miss Jo and finally
“settled” with Amy Holness (20). There is frequent reference to “common knowledge”;
the narrator is just repeating this common knowledge for the reader. “Linguistic rituals”
offer secrecy and encoded meaning. As Maydene Brassington herself realizes, “there are
classes everywhere and . . . those below must hate those above and must devise some way
of communicating this without seeming too obviously rude” (21). This strategy mirrors
the linguistic survival strategies of the enslaved and also makes the reader piece together
stories told at a slant. Furthermore, the novel is structured so as to prove to the reader
that the story is not easily come by, for it begins disorientingly in the middle and moves
backward and forward in time: the action cannot be understood until many characters
have spoken. Because the story is pieced together through various characters’ informa-
tion about the major events, *Myal* embraces dialogue and difference.
Brodber’s politics and poetics of difference therefore become articulated through her emphasis on heterogeneous community, multiple and divergent points of view, combinations of diverse resources, and partiality. Her pedagogy of improvisation culminates in Ella’s struggle with the story of Mr. Joe’s farm, which she must teach to her students as part of the curriculum. Ella recognizes the text as a colonial allegory, a fable of slavery and dependence that draws the schoolchildren into “complicity” with the story’s implicit message that the farm animals (read: the colonized) are “ignorant” and cannot survive outside their master’s control (97, 106). The writer of the story has “robbed his characters of their possibilities,” has “taken their knowledge of their original and natural world away from them and left them empty shells—duppies, zombies, living deads capable only of receiving orders from someone else and carrying them out”: another level of the novel’s theme of spirit thievery (106–7). She learns that she can teach against the grain of the text to help her students reach a counterdiscursive interpretation. Brodber enacts her pedagogy through the model of Ella’s questioning and search for “alternatives” (105), as well as the young woman’s realization, as Maydene understands, that she cannot merely throw out the text but must “find a way around it” (104). The monologic text contains the seeds of its own undoing, just as the monolithic text of colonial conquest, to use Harris’s formulation, contains the cross-cultural seeds of transformation.

Improvisation becomes part of this lesson. In the same way that “Maydene believed in trying” (14), questioning is emphasized over knowledge. Reverend Simpson participates in Ella’s gradual understanding of the fable’s problems: he questions her in stages to “spur her thoughts to words” (97). William Brassington also understands the value of a dialogic method of learning and asks Simpson to organize seminars to “give her a wider audience that can question her and by the questioning bring her ideas closer to the fore” (108). Musical metaphors in the novel support the theme of questioning: Willie, Dan, and Perce build analysis together using a call-and-response pattern of dialogue that resembles musical improvisation, a comparison that is supported by the many references to the drums, trumpets, and cymbals that they “play together” (38) and by the “sound” that has been stolen from them (66). Improvisation becomes a particularly powerful weapon against spirit thievery, as Miss Gatha shows when she struggles with Mass Levi over Anita’s spirit:

So Miss Gatha spoke: “Nine times three is twenty-seven. Three times three times three.” She recited; she sang; she intoned. In one register, in another; in one octave, then higher. Lyrically, with syncopation, with improvisations far, far out from her original composition. The changes were musical only. The lyrics never changed. (71)
With all these changes, Mass Levi cannot maintain his possession of Anita: “If she didn’t change her style so much! If she would only keep one tune, he could follow her and hold her. But that woman was slippery” (72).³⁴ Through using improvisation to fight Mass Levi, Miss Gatha is able to elude his grasp.

Miss Gatha’s strategy is Brodber’s as well: Brodber uses a pedagogy of improvisation to approach the healing of Caribbean community from different directions, on multiple registers and “octaves,” using different styles and a variety of illustrations to outline the same problem. Her vision of improvisation as resistance mirrors her version of syncretism: monolithic discourses of colonization, spirit thievery, and patriarchy that suppress otherness are incapacitated when attacked and resisted with heterogeneity itself, on multiple levels and with varying strategies. Brodber’s syncretism advocates a turn to the creative resources of diverse community, to hybridity as a living tool that is, as Helen Tiffin notes, “initially symbolic of a destructive colonial subjectification” but becomes “facilitating and catalytic.”³⁵ To the extent that Ella’s struggle with the fable of Mr. Joe’s farm indicates a direction for the future, Brodber’s syncretism is also about contingency and compromise, not about insularity and refusing admission to outside elements: syncretism includes the strategy of infiltration, the imperative to “get in their books and know their truth” (67). The centrality of myalism in the novel indicates the constant process of creolization that is sustained by elements from the different cultures that make up Caribbean communities. The community of difference that is Grove Town works together, using difference to enable creative solutions. Brodber suggests that the possibilities for collective renewal lie in a recognition of diversity, for “there are so many paths” (71), “there are ways and ways of knowing” (76), “there are alternatives” (105), and there are “other worlds” (91).

Although Brodber does not explicitly connect her work with that of Wilson Harris, Condé has directly addressed the theory of créolité in both her critical and literary work, including Crossing the Mangrove. Indeed, Anne Malena points out that Condé “shows a remarkable willingness to engage with the theory of ‘créolité’ and to participate in its discourse, in spite of the fact that it has rightly been perceived as masculinist.”³⁶ At

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³⁴. Ella, at the climax of her crisis with Selwyn, repeats Miss Gatha’s strategy, improvising at different speeds and styles on the line “Mammy Mary’s mulatto mule must have maternity wear” (84). Her behavior indicates that she has “tripped out indeed” (84) but perhaps also that she is starting to resist spirit thievery by becoming “slippery.”


the same time, Condé enters the discussion as a challenger: she discounts the ordering imperative of créolité as articulated by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confi ant, and she offers her own literary and critical exploration of Creole Caribbean identity despite the dismissal of her work by the créolistes.³⁷ She asks, “Are there not many versions of antillanité? New senses of créolité?”³⁸ Miriam Rosser concurs that Condé’s novel joins other Caribbean women’s writing in offering “counterdiscourses to the masculinist metanarratives of Caribbean social space and identity” such as the theories of créolité proposed by Bernabé et al.³⁹ Through Crossing the Mangrove, Condé offers a feminist critique of créolité.

Créolité is likely the articulation of hybridity/creolization that is most discussed and debated in current Caribbean criticism. Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confi ant develop the theory largely in Éloge de la créolité (originally published in French in 1989 and translated into English as “In Praise of Creoleness” in 1990) and Lettres créoles. The Éloge seeks to articulate a more authentic Creole Caribbean identity and cultural politics, and proposes that this creoleness and Creole literature will come about by a revaluation of the Creole language: “We did conquer it, this French language . . . we inhabited it. It was alive in us. In it we built our own language. . . . Our literature must bear witness of this conquest.”⁴⁰ As Burton notes, “Créolité locates the key to West Indianness not in ‘race’ nor even in ‘culture’ but in language.”⁴¹ In fact, the créolistes assert, “neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles.”⁴² They advocate an end to “raciological distinctions” in multiracial societies of the Caribbean and suggest designating all Caribbean people “by the only suitable word: Creole.”⁴³

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³⁷. Patrick Chamoiseau, chosen by Condé as the first “public reader” of her novel in Martinique, reads Traversée de la mangrove largely for its representation of authentic Creole culture and chastises Condé for what he sees as her failure to represent an “authentic” Creole voice. He writes, “[some] words of your vocabulary . . . fail to invoke in me anything besides the flavor of other places and other cultures . . . all the footnotes that explain what we already know make us think, dear Maryse, that you are not addressing us, but some other people.” His review becomes patronizing at other moments, too, such as his comment at the end of the review: “What can I say of the rest? I could, of course, discuss the lack of psychological breadth of certain characters . . . I could discuss the vocabulary, often ill-suited to the cultural level of this or that person; I could discuss the choice of images that fail to stir my heart; . . . But what for? Let us leave this task to the doctors of standards.” See Chamoiseau, “Reflections on Maryse Condé’s Traversée de la mangrove,” Callaloo 14, no. 2 (1991): 394.


⁴³. Ibid., 893.
The créolistes claim to derive from and yet surpass Édouard Glissant’s work on Antillanité. However, Glissant cautioned that creolization was not “the glorification of the composite nature of a people” but rather “a cross-cultural process” and “an unceasing process of transformation.”⁴⁴ The créolistes, on the other hand, articulate a conception of creoleness that is more fixed than processual, defining it as “an edifice to be inhabited” and “a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier: a Totality.”⁴⁵ Despite their claims to the openness of creoleness, the créolistes lose the self-consciously nonreductionist ethic that Glissant brought to Antillanité. As Dash asserts, the Éloge turns Glissant’s ideas into “ideological dogma,” for “créolité is tempted to produce its own rhetoric, its own approved texts, its own hierarchy of intellectuals. . . . It lacks the ironic self-scrutiny, the insistence on process (‘creolisation’ and not créolité) that is characteristic of Glissant’s thought.”⁴⁶

Creoleness also seems to be a hidden, unchanging, and therefore fragile essence that can be unearthed, “somewhat like with the process of archeological excavations: when the field was covered, we had to progress with light strokes of the brush so as not to alter or lose any part of ourselves hidden behind French ways.”⁴⁷ Condé has commented on the dangers of this invocation of authenticity and the restrictiveness of créolité: “The Martiniquan school of créolité is singular because it presumes to impose law and order. Créolité is alone in reducing the overall expression of creoleness to the use of the Creole language. . . . This implies a notion of ‘authenticity,’ which inevitably engenders exclusion. . . . Worse yet, the créolité school is terrorizing in its detailed catalogue of acceptable literary themes.”⁴⁸ She states further, “I fear that Creole might become a prison in which the Caribbean writers run the risk of being jailed.”⁴⁹ Condé caricatures the prescriptions of créolité in Crossing the Mangrove in the figure of Lucien, a writer who has “never written a word” because he anticipates his peers asking “is this novel really Guadeloupean” because he cannot write in Creole.

As argued at the beginning of this paper, a liberatory theory of creolization must address the differences of social power that make up heterogeneous community. Ironically, the emphasis in the Éloge on an essential shared creoleness elides diversity, even

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⁴⁴. Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 139–42.
though créolité is inspired by linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. Myriam Rosser argues that the créolistes call for an end to “raciological distinctions” treats ethnic differences as “superficial” and “forecloses the very praxis of exploration that could expose the processes through which differences materialize, augment, or resolve themselves within mixed cultures.” In the Éloge, Rosser argues, “créolité turns out to be a category that sublimates differences—of ethnicity as well as of gender and of class—in order to promote an organic vision of a whole, harmonious community.” It is clear in the Éloge which gender is the agent of culture in their program for creoleness: in order to return to oral Creole culture they must “inseminate Creole in the new writing.” The male figure is responsible for the insemination of this reborn culture, and the male writer suffers a metaphorical “castration” when cut off from Creole culture. Condé points out that sexuality in their model is “exclusively male sexuality,” and the writers offer women only “stereotypical or negative roles.” A. James Arnold, further, argues that créolité is “not only masculine but masculinist,” and he points out that the male créolistes, in formal and informal venues, denounce French West Indian women writers for not adequately producing Creole writing as they define it. The créolistes, as Jeannie Suk puts it, “situ ate themselves as inheritors of a lineage dedicated to remasculinizing their culture and literature.”

In Crossing the Mangrove, then, Condé enacts a critique of créolité for its gender politics, its focus on essence rather than process, and its limiting and prescriptive literary model. Much of what Condé does with her novel is critical without always being clearly constructive; that is, she pinpoints the flaws in theories of créolité that link Creole identity with an exclusionary, unchanging, and “authentic” representation of community, but her own vision of creolization is not always clear among the ironies and ambiguities of her narrative. At the same time, one can see in the novel that Condé is laying out the terms for a contemporary vision of heterogeneity, one that does not shy from the intransigences of social conflict and inequities across differences but that insists on, as Rosser puts it, the “plural and diversely gendered subjectivities” that make up “the foundations for community” in the Caribbean.

Crossing the Mangrove offers a productive comparison to Myal largely because of the ways the narrative structure invokes a diverse community with multiple voices. Unlike Myal, however, Condé’s text reveals a community whose multiple voices are in discord, competition, and even violent confrontation. Set in the small Guadeloupean community of Rivière au Sel in the late 1980s, the novel is structured around the one-night wake of Francis Sancher, a stranger to the community who died a mysterious yet foretold death. The wake offers Condé a venue for bringing the various members of the community together in one place, and it offers a provisional sense of inclusivity, for “you don’t lock the door to a wake. It remains wide open for all and sundry to surge in” (12). The key middle section of the novel is divided into twenty first- and third-person monologues spoken successively by nineteen members of the community (one character, Mira, speaks twice). Although they are physically together under one roof during the wake, the narrators reveal their startling differences from each other both by the details of their biographies and narration and by the ways they offer different, partial, and sometimes contradictory versions of Francis Sancher’s background and appearance in the community.

As Sancher is the locus for this diverse community’s attention, much of Condé’s exploration of creolization lies with his character. Francis Sancher, or Francisco Alvarez-Sanchez, arrives mysteriously in Rivière au Sel and moves into the haunted Alexis house. He is both isolated and uprooted—“sans chez,” as Renée Larrier quips on his flexible name⁵⁶—and yet intimately affects the lives of everyone in the village. There can be no certainty about his past or his time in the village, however, for his story is told piecemeal in layered, repetitive, and contradictory ways by each of the nineteen narrators whose lives he has affected. As in Myal, gossip, “reported or distorted” (Condé 186), is the primary source of information about Sancher. Moïse learns that Sancher’s family were white Creoles, but this information does not complete his genealogy, for his mother was the daughter of a black coffee planter in Colombia. He is described as having both gray and black hair, sand-colored eyes, “bicolored” arms “almost black up to the elbow, then golden above,” and a “rich, roasted corn color” face (80). Another narrator calls him a “brown-skinned mulatto” (121). But as Loulou Lameaulnes, the wealthy white Creole patriarch points out, “the popular imagination . . . transforms a man, whitens him or blackens him” (98). For example, Mira anticipates that when her son grows up and searches for stories of his father Francis, he would be told “we don’t even know whether he was white, black, or Indian. He had every blood in his body” (192).

The shifting nature of Sancher’s racial subjectivity does not, I would argue, make him the culmination of all forms of creolization, or “an ‘everyman’: an archetypal inhabitant of the Caribbean archipelago,”⁵⁷ as Lionnet would have it—the weight of his white Creole past and the mysterious ancestral crime for which he expects to die encourage a historically specific reading of his complicated subjectivity. According to gossip, Sancher’s great-grandfather was a white Creole planter whose slaves cursed him: each male descendent dies mysteriously in his early fifties. Sancher tried to flee from this past, then returned to Rivière au Sel to end the cycle of the curse, “to come full circle . . . return to square one and stop everything” (83). He impregnates two women in the village, though, and therefore has enabled the curse to continue another generation. Sancher tells Moïse, “One can’t change sides! Swap one role for another. Break the chain of misery. I’ve tried and you see, nothing’s changed” (24). One’s ancestors, he claims, “leave their crimes intact within us” (24). Sancher cannot find a way to creatively transform his legacy of violence.

The metaphorical curse, of course, is not Sancher’s alone. As Xantippe’s narration, the last one of the wake, shows, the crimes of a slavery past must be collectively rehearsed and digested as part of the process of coming to terms with the creolized present. Xantippe, a “Go-Between” (198) and liminal figure, “know[s] where the tortured bodies are buried” (205). These bodies could be the slaves tortured by Sancher’s ancestor or they could be representative of the general violence of slavery and colonial control. But despite Sancher’s terror of this mysterious character, Xantippe is not the agent of Sancher’s death: “I won’t touch him. The time for revenge is over” (205). Even as Sancher cannot “come full circle” and “stop everything”—cannot close the door on the crimes of the past—so Xantippe decides that revenge cannot change the present. At the same time, the opaqueness of Sancher’s origins (most of his story comes to the reader via gossip) indicates the danger of drawing lines of victims and victimizers when defining cultural identity: Lucien Evariste, when chastised by his patriotic political friends for his friendship with Sancher, explains, “I divided the world in two: us and the bastards. Now I realize it’s a mistake” (187).

Sancher— with the curse of his past, his ambiguous and contradictory signifiers, his “heart of gold” (62), and his named and unnamed crimes—is the insecure foundation for the novel’s representation of a heterogeneous community. Condé presents Rivière au Sel as a community of diverse and syncretic ethnic origins, emigrants and exiles, and yet also with a highly xenophobic collective voice. As Moïse notes, “You need to have

lived inside the four walls of a small community to know its spitefulness and fear of foreigners” (22). The linchpins of the community are the wealthy Ramsarans and Lameaulnes: the South Asian Ramsarans are respected as long as they “know their place” (8), and white Creole Loulou Lameaulnes believes all foreigners should be deported from Guadeloupe. The community also includes Haitian Désinor, the “misbegotten freak” Moïse (ostracized for his mixed black and Chinese heritage), and Loulou’s wife Dinah, of Dutch and Indonesian heritage. Mama Sonson, a black woman whose son marries a white woman, ponders, “Perhaps those words, black and white, no longer mean anything” (61), but these divisions do matter to the community.

The community’s diverse origins and obsession with origins are represented by the tangled roots of the mangrove swamp of the novel’s title. The use of the mangrove as a symbol of cultural identity links Condé’s novel with the Éloge, and its declaration that “Creoleness is . . . our primitive soup and our continuation, our primeval chaos and our mangrove swamp of virtualities.” In the Éloge, the “deep mangrove swamp of Creoleness” focuses a constellation of descriptors: it represents “our original chaos,” the authentic “ancestral speech” that Creole writers seek to resurrect, and the “fecundity” of Creole “roots.” Yet Condé’s text twists these associations among the mangrove swamp and cultural roots, genealogy, and access to authentic Creole culture: in her novel, the mangrove swamp takes on a complicated set of meanings that articulates, in relation to the Éloge writers, her ideas on créolité. The key to Condé’s manipulation of the association between mangroves and creoleness is the book that Sancher attempts to write: he knows that “I’ll never finish this book because before I’ve even written the first line . . . I’ve already found the title: ‘Crossing the Mangrove’ ” (158). The fact that Sancher cannot ever write the book “Crossing the Mangrove” does not bode well for the Caribbean writer seeking to resurrect the mangrove swamp of creoleness through writing. Vilma indicates that his project is especially doomed when she shrugs and replies, “You don’t cross a mangrove. You’d spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You’d be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud” (158). Sancher, however, agrees: “Yes, that’s it, that’s precisely it” (158). In fact, he dies face down in the mud of the mangrove swamp, never having resolved the questions of his genealogy. His mysterious end shows the folly of his having tried to “untangle the skeins of life” like the roots of the mangrove tree: “Life’s problems are like trees. We see the trunk, we see the branches and the leaves. But we can’t see the roots, hidden deep down under the ground” (139).

Not only are Sancher’s roots tangled and hard to discern among the gossip about his past but the roots of the community also come from multiple, criss-crossed sources. The mangrove is a particularly interesting choice of tree to use as a representation of cultural roots, for, as Hewitt notes, “in the mangrove’s thick growth it is difficult to tell roots from trunks and branches, origins from effects, beginnings from ends.”⁵⁹ In the mangrove swamp, in fact, as Hayes points out, “it is impossible to tell which roots belong to which tree,” for “roots do not necessarily precede the tree” and a tree “may shoot down new roots from its branches.”⁶⁰ This characteristic of the tree indicates heterogeneity of roots, as the créolistes perhaps intend, but the lack of correspondence between roots and trees makes cultural genealogy, a search for origins or cultural authenticity, next to impossible. Condé’s use of the mangrove swamp image confounds a celebratory creoleness that seeks to trace well-defined roots to an earlier, more authentic, cultural identity.

Condé’s attempt to find a more productive representation of the collectivity that undergirds heterogeneous community finds its fullest articulation in the novel’s mode of narration. The multiplicity of voices that make up the novel’s narration does not, as some critics would argue, result in “the unifying voice” of “an entire collectivity”⁶¹ or “a utopian universe in which differences are respected and do not lead to mutual negation.”⁶² Rather, the narrative structure indicates significant differences in point of view and conflicts between characters. Each character’s monologue reveals differences not just in the individual’s biography and identity but also in the point of view of each character that is not merely unique or individual but shaped by the speaker’s gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. The mystery of Sancher provides a focal point for reflections and actions, as the healing of Anita and Ella do in Myal; however, in Condé’s novel the community does not work together across differences, as Brodber’s characters do, toward the common goal of solving the mystery. Intersections, understandings, and agreements are rare, even though many characters seek to understand the differences within the community.

In many ways, Condé’s narration performs the same pedagogical function as Brodber’s. The reader lacks access to an authoritative voice and must therefore seek for meaning among the novel’s contradictions and partial explanations. Contradiction and

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incompleteness become their own sources of meaning: *Crossing the Mangrove* enacts the process of questioning, of openness to different explanations, and absence of a central unifying presence that are necessary for understanding her vision of heterogeneous community. Condé’s strategy is perhaps to counter what she calls the “commands” and “order” of the male theorists of West Indian literature, with the “disorder” and “freedom” of a less schematized, more woman-centered, vision of creolization.⁶³ She also brings a sense of skepticism to the certitude of the *Éloge* writers and their, in many ways, closed system of créolité. Finally, Condé uses the multiple and differing points of view of her characters to divert the reader from seeking a single explanation of creolization and to refocus attention on the constantly changing process of a community’s definition of itself.

The novel’s foregrounding of narrative voice and point of view draws attention to the importance of gender in the definition of diverse community. The seven female narrators speak in the first person, and the only two of the twelve male narrators who do so might be considered marginal to the community: Joby, Loulou’s feminized “pale little boy” (7), and Xantippe, the outsider. This strategy suggests an authorization of a female, or marginalized, point of view. At the same time, all speech in the novel must be judged skeptically and provisionally, for the multiple indicators of oral discourse that pepper the text include the frequent disclaimer “but people will say anything” (18). Further, Condé has indicated in an interview that this strategy was not necessarily deliberate:

> Some chapters came to me in the first person and others in the third. I don’t quite know why. I cannot explain it rationally. Later on, I noticed that narratives by female characters were in the first person. Then I realized that this was maybe more natural for me.⁶⁴

Still, the women’s first-person narration does have the effect of drawing attention to their monologues as testimonies of women’s enclosure in domestic spaces, as daughters or wives, in Rivière au Sel, and of the changes they will begin after the wake. The switch back and forth from first-person “women’s” to third-person “men’s” narration in the novel indicates that gender is a constituent part of the community’s many differences.

Condé also points to marginalization in the community on the basis of sexuality. When Moïse and Sancher begin a friendship, rumors circulate that they are lovers: “There were some wicked sneers. There was something fishy about that friendship and the two men were makoumeh [homosexuals]! That’s for sure” (20). Some determine that

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⁶⁴ Françoise Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 73.
although Moïse could be gay, Sancher “didn’t look like one,” especially when compared with “Sirop Batterie who dressed up as a woman at carnival time in Petit-Bourg” (20). This sequence seems to associate homosexuality with foreignness (Sancher), while also asserting the presence of a local “makoumeh,” Sirop Batterie. At the same time, the narrative asserts, the community is less concerned about Sancher’s sexual preference than the fact that “he did nothing with his ten fingers” (20)—he is set apart more by class and vocation than by sexuality. Désinor, the Haitian immigrant, offers another representation of homosexuality in his monologue: he and his friend Carlos are lovers, and in a matter-of-fact revelation he remembers their “lovemaking” that makes his heart “[glow] with warmth” (165). Although the rumors about Moïse and Sancher reflect the “mischief” of gossip (20), Condé’s inclusion of gay characters in the novel functions as a resistant form of heterogeneity.

Crossing the Mangrove offers a forum for examining how alternative sexualities are a form of diversity that has been excluded from the imagining of Caribbean creolization. Condé, in fact, indicates in an interview that her representations of homosexuality in the novel may have been prompted by the “hypocrisy” of statements like Fanon’s that homosexuality “[doesn’t] exist in Guadeloupe and Martinique.”⁶⁵ Jarrod Hayes has usefully pointed out ways in which Condé’s portrayal of the gossip about Moïse and Sancher “almost seems as if it were written to refute Fanon.”⁶⁶ He argues that Condé deliberately uses a Creole word, “makoumè,” to assert a Guadeloupean gay identity, and also turns Fanon’s “Ma Commère” (“godmothers”) from Black Skin, White Masks into “compères” (in the original French) to regender the term masculine.⁶⁷ That these criticisms of Fanon’s homophobia are projected in the narrative through an apparently homophobic collective voice makes the move particularly subversive. Hayes further suggests that “the multiple roots of the mangrove . . . disrupt the sexual normativity implied by a notion of ‘roots’ that depends on the family tree.” Interestingly, Hayes also points out that “makoumè” also means “gossip,” and argues that Condé’s glossing of the word “makoumé” as “homosexual” makes the references to homosexuality in the novel appear even more central: “The homosexuality in question is a subject of gossip, and this, in a novel whose plot consists entirely of gossip.”⁶⁸ Hayes’s observations on the links between homosexuality, gossip, and mangrove roots can support an argument that Condé is chal-

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⁶⁵. Ibid., 135. For Fanon’s infamous footnote, see Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 180, n. 44.
⁶⁷. Ibid., 470.
⁶⁸. Ibid., 467–68, 470.
lenging the overt heterosexism and homophobia that characterize the mythologizing of créolité in Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confi ant.

Considering Condé’s use of caricature and contradiction and her upturning of many of the edifices of créolité as articulated by the Éloge writers, it is in some ways difficult to determine what her positive version of creolization is in Crossing the Mangrove. Noting that many of the characters end their monologues with a commitment to changing their lives, and noting that the final section of the novel is “First Light,” a time for new beginnings, some critics have interpreted that the community undergoes a significant change as a whole as a result of individuals’ encounters with Francis Sancher. Patrick ffrench, for instance, suggests that “through the sacrifice of Sancher the community moves towards a recognition and an acceptance of the strangeness or of the difference which constitutes it.”⁶⁹ Many members of the community seem far from this recognition, however, and the path toward change that most characters contemplate involves leaving the community or island—hence the repeated litany of “Leave” (29) and “Elsewhere” (43) that ends the sections of Moïse, Aristide, Mira, and Emile. Yet the fact that individuals will change and leave Rivière au Sel does not appear to indicate the death of the community: the community will, and must, “discard the old, worn-out clothes [it] slipped on morning after morning” just as the individual characters have gained courage to do (208).

The key to determining Condé’s vision for creolization lies with the narrative structure of the novel: the community does not speak with a unified voice but with multiple, located, contradictory voices. Creolization does not mean, for Condé, a heterogeneous yet harmonious mix, but a community of differences that must be negotiated and tested, in the midst of, in some cases, intransigent conflicts and power differences. It is a feminist vision in which shared commitments can emerge that do not require sameness or absence of contradiction. Gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity mark some of the differences within the community. It is a contemporary view of creolization, one that does not assume that a creolized Guadeloupean identity must, for its survival, remain rooted on Guadeloupean land, and one that allows for the changing dynamics of continual immigration and diasporic movement, as well as the cultural leaching caused by departmentalization. The inability to cross the mangrove swamp of a rooted past places responsibility with the present community for creating a viable future.

The dynamics of creolization in Condé’s framework differ in many ways from the créolité espoused by Bernabé, et al. Condé refuses to heroize the male figure of créolité,

the conteur who appears in novels such as Chamoiseau’s *Solibo Magnifique*.

Sancher is a talker, but as a writer he is impotent, a “zombie.” He appears at times a tall mahogany tree (15), at other times “weak and whining” (23), and he dies an undignified death face down in the mud. Sancher is not a positive figurehead for Creole identity or locus for the community’s créolité. Condé also, in *Crossing the Mangrove*, forgoes the prescriptive stance of the créolistes, preferring instead a tone of questioning and partiality. “Sancher is all questions,” as Lamiot points out, and Condé’s novel “set[s] up a complete apparatus of questioning.”

The characters, and reader, proceed from a need to learn the cause of Sancher’s death and the mystery of his origins, but despite the many explanations given through gossip and narration, the reader, like Vilma, does not “know what truth there is in all those stories the people of Rivière au Sel tell” (160). The recognition that understanding can only be partial and contingent means that any vision of creolization and community will be part of an “infinite rehearsal” (the term is Wilson Harris’s) and a cycle of interrogation and renegotiation, a pattern indicated by Sancher’s unending family curse and his pledge to “return each season with a chattering green bird on my fist” (208).

This paper deliberately began with *Myal* and ended with *Crossing the Mangrove* in order to avoid the suggestion that Brodber’s novel offers solutions to the unresolved questions of Condé’s text. Despite significant similarities in scope, *Myal* and *Crossing the Mangrove* differ at least in their visions of the possibilities for community renewal, political and spiritual change, and the potential for syncretism or créolité to heal or prompt this change. Although Condé’s novel focuses on revealing diversity and arguing for the need for continual negotiation of difference, healing and change appear to happen in Rivière au Sel primarily at the individual level, unlike in *Myal*, where the community achieves and begins healing at a number of different levels through the linked actions of diverse members of the community. Some of these differences could be explained by the interpretation that Condé’s skepticism is directed more at the possibilities for creolized identity rather than at the transformative possibilities of creolization as process. Theories of creolization, such as the créolité of the Élodge writers, can slip into a language of identity and hence draw boundaries around the creolization that is purported to be inclusive and open to change. On the other hand, when examined in conjunction with *Myal*, Condé’s text appears to reveal more clearly a vision, not program, of creolization.


It is through *Crossing the Mangrove*’s narration via multiple and conflicting voices that Condé explores a pedagogical aspect of creolization in a way comparable to Brodber’s *Myal*. Both novels insist on an approach to syncretism or créolité that is as open, multiple, contingent, and dialogic as the heterogeneity that marks creolized Caribbean communities. This creolization does not involve a leveling of differences but rather an attentiveness to the material distinctions between the “plural and diversely gendered subjectivities” in heterogeneity.⁷² Creolization is, in Brodber’s and Condé’s formulation, “ceaselessly unfinished”⁷³ and gains its purchase of resistance and creative resources not from Manichean opposition or the excavation of subterranean mangrove roots but from “roots beyond roots.”⁷⁴

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⁷² Rosser, “Figuring Caribbeanness,” 494.
⁷⁴ Ibid., 99.