

ESSAY

Creolization Otherwise: Centering the Local Intertextualities of Ananda Devi's *Pagli*

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A New Reading of Creolized Aesthetics

The past few decades have seen the emergence of what I call the “novel of creolization,” generating a profusion of interrelated theories and even to-do guides on literary and linguistic creolization. Engaging in practices such as bricolage and métissage, the novel of creolization is in line with a broader global trend defined by a consciously hybrid language and form, but it is nevertheless grounded in the specificity of Creole geographies, the unique cultural and linguistic landscapes of former plantation economies that gave birth to a Creole language. These geographies are the result of a sophisticated process of sedimented creolization that marks the very textuality of the novel of creolization. In other words, stories of creolization *within* the novel inevitably translate into a creolization *of* the novel, of its storytelling process and form. Yet this process and form have been studied mostly through dichotomous concepts opposing (while relating, in some instances) the colonized to the colonizer, Creole to the colonial language, and orality to writing. But the history of the colonized in these regions was never so monolithic; the presence of Indigenous peoples and the waves of postslavery migration from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa under colonial rule complicate the issue. Nevertheless, many theories of creolization artificially magnify the solidarity between formerly colonized groups and forcefully unite them under the banner of Creole and orality. Consequently, the historical and present conflicts among the formerly colonized are expunged, the participation of Indigenous and Asian languages in

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linguistic creolization is silenced, and the dynamic interface between orality and writing is forced into a linear, before-after time line. Even concepts that do emphasize the presence of other communities in Creole societies flatten the uneven relations of power among the colonized. The trajectory of this intellectual history has then not allowed for a theory of the literature of creolization that properly reflects all the intricacies of creolization to emerge. In fact, can we even parse the layers of a textuality that adequately accounts for the full sociopolitical and linguistic enmeshment of Creole societies, a textuality that accounts for discords and disparities between formerly colonized groups in Creole societies, without erasing the legacy of colonial hegemony? The beginning of an answer is, I believe, to be found beyond what commonly passes as the novel of creolization.

The Mauritian author Ananda Devi's oeuvre, successful both at home and abroad, is often studied for its aesthetics, but not at all within popular frameworks of creolization.¹ After all, it does not explicitly emphasize the racial and cultural métissage originating from the plantation era, nor is the Creole language at the heart of its political stakes. Instead, Devi's works uncover tensions betrayed by the "nation arc-en-ciel" ("rainbow nation") discourse of racial harmony promoted by nationalists, politicians, and the tourism industry of Mauritius.² As for Devi's poetics, it is not ostentatiously creolized. Save for a few words of Kreol Morisien or Mauritian Bhojpuri scattered throughout some of her works, she writes in a French that, to the casual observer, aligns with contemporary Frenches typical of the metropole.³ When measured against what has become the universal criteria of creolization, Devi's novels do not fit the mold. But a close reading of her writing reveals an aesthetics that expertly intersperses the multiple cultural and linguistic geographies of the Creole space without expunging its endogenous stratifications. Devi's writing can offer an important intervention in the field of creolization, one that is rooted in a conversation with local textualities, which remain undetected under the lens of mainstream theories of creolization.

In this essay, I follow the intellectual history that created generalizations of the archetypal Creole

society, which I nuance by shining a light on the particular forms that creolization takes in different contexts. I pay particular attention to the cultural and linguistic multiplicities that emerge from them, in all their unevenness. I also consider how Devi's novel *Pagli* (2001) manages the exceptional task of weaving into its aesthetics these multiplicities and their unevenness. In so doing, *Pagli* and similar works bring about a much-needed epistemological shift in the field of creolization and creolized aesthetics. To explore the ways in which it does this, I propose the literary text as theoretical intervention. I trust the text to contain reflections on its own function, by keeping true to Linda Hutcheon's definition of some literary texts (the metanarrative brand of literature) as "fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). I explore the interracial love story between an Indo-Mauritian woman and an Afro-Mauritian man at the heart of the novel as an embedded allegory for the text's aesthetics, similarly weaved from a creolized textuality. Finally, I excavate the novel's intertextual conversations with local texts and practices. Devi's works having most often been read alongside Western and Indian influences, I offer a corrective by juxtaposing *Pagli* against a local archive instead.⁴

Beyond the Binaries of Universal Creolization

In 1976, Édouard Glissant published an article titled "Free and Forced Poetics" in *Alcheringa*, a short-lived but important ethnopoetics journal based at Boston University. Evoking the diglossia affecting the use of French and Creole in his native Martinique, he discusses strategies to find freedom in self-expression usually mediated by an oppressive colonial language. Five years later, a French version of the article appeared in revised form in his *Le discours antillais* (1981; *Caribbean Discourse*), but not before the English version was read and cited by the Barbadian intellectual Kamau Brathwaite in his seminal lecture, "History of the Voice" (given between 1979 and 1981, and published later). In it, Brathwaite mentions for the first time his concept of a "nation language": "the kind of English spoken by

the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors” (260). With examples from local literature and music, Brathwaite demonstrates that Caribbean English is penetrated through and through by a distinctly Caribbean spirit, which is in turn said to originate in West African languages and oral traditions. But while Brathwaite centers African languages and registers in his “nation language,” Glissant favors a Caribbean-centered poetics (at least in his early works), using the metaphor of the rhizome with lateral connections instead of roots anchored in an atavistic motherland. Nevertheless, they are both concerned with imaginaries of a European elsewhere imposed on the Caribbean through a colonial language, poignantly captured in Brathwaite’s evocation of schoolchildren mediating their local landscape and experience through foreign concepts when writing: “the snow was falling on the cane fields” (264).

Following Glissant, the Martinican writers Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant came up with their *créolité* manifesto, “Éloge de la créolité” (1989; “In Praise of Creoleness”). *Créolité* conceptualizes Caribbean identity to include, in addition to the white planter class and the formerly enslaved, postslavery migrations from Asia and the Middle East, among others. But in their zeal to not repeat previous trends that had anchored Caribbean identity in exterior origins, the Creolists acknowledge the hybrid genetic makeup of the Caribbean only in negation, starting with the very first line of the manifesto: “Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles” (Bernabé et al. 886). In addition to repudiating origins, *créolité* polices the degree to which a people should be considered Creole or Creole enough. *Créolité* thus includes “Europeans and Africans in the small Caribbean islands; Europeans, Africans, and Indians in the Mascarene islands; Europeans and Asians in certain areas of the Philippines or in Hawaii; Arabs and black Africans in Zanzibar” (893), but not Trinidad Hindus, because “in certain sugar cane areas of Trinidad, Hindu culture adapted itself to the new environment without getting involved in a process of Creolization as opposed to the *bondyekouli* [the

hybrid Indian gods of Martinique and Guadeloupe] of the small Caribbean islands, which is a Creole cult based in Hinduism” (894). For the Creolists, Hinduism in Trinidad, unlike its variant in Martinique and Guadeloupe, retains too much of its original elements to be considered Creole. In brief, Brathwaite and Glissant problematized the incongruities between the snow of Europe and the cane fields of plantation economies, without paying attention to the diversity and internal hierarchies of the cane fields, while the Creolists dismissed internal hierarchies altogether by sacrificing all differences to the primacy of an ahistorical creolization, measured in the right amount of intermixture.

Addressing the history of Asian indenture in Creole societies, a history generally silenced in theories of creolization, the Mauritian scholar Khal Torabully came up with the concept of “coolitude.” In naming his concept, Torabully is inspired by Aimé Césaire’s “négritude” (Couassi 69), but his thoughts show affinities with Glissantian concepts and *créolité*. Coolitude centers the coral as a metaphor for creolized Indo-Mauritian identity, the coral being both hard and soft and “traversed by currents, continuously open to new thoughts and systems” (Carter and Torabully 152). For Véronique Bragard, the coral “remind[s] one of both Glissant’s ‘racines sous-marines’ or Césaire’s ‘laminaire,’” and its death out of water emphasizes that “identity cannot be grasped nor taken out of context without running the risk of freezing or fossilizing it” (230). The “cale” (“cargo hold”) in Torabully’s *Cale d’étoiles: Coolitude* (1992; *Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude*) even prefigures the chronotope of the slave ship central to Paul Gilroy’s characterization of a transnational Black identity in *The Black Atlantic*, published one year later (Bragard 223). In this, coolitude adheres to identity in motion rather than the creolizations rooted in specific geographies. In freeing previous iterations of creolization from their essentialist constraints, Torabully is nevertheless guilty of the ahistoricism imputable to *créolité*. He defines “coolie,” the reappropriation of a derogatory colonial term for indentured laborers, as “tout navigateur sans / registre de bord” (“any navigator without / a logbook”), be they “de Goa, de

Pondichéri, de Chandernagor, de / Cocane, de Delhi, de Surat, de Londres, de Shangai, / de Lorient, de Saint-Malo" ("from Goa, from Pondicherry, from Chandannagar, from / Cocane, from Delhi, from Surat, from London, from Shanghai, / from Lorient, from Saint-Malo"; Torabully 89).⁵ In equalizing distinct migration histories, Torabully fails, like his predecessors, to account for the historically sedimented stratifications of Creole economies.

As Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet remind us, "creolization describes the encounter among peoples in a highly stratified terrain" (25), and "[w]ithout an anchor in history, creolization can become too pliable, like any other concept that might too easily be decontextualized, such as hybridity, mixture, bricolage, and transculturation" (24–25). This important reminder should come with the understanding that situations of "domination and conflict" and resistance to them almost never exist in binaries, and that Creole societies house complex hierarchies with multiple and internal layers of hegemonies and marginalizations. Shih and Lionnet advocate for "bricolage" and other types of artistic and aesthetic creolization, but, following Stuart Hall and Françoise Vergès, they emphasize that it should be "a tactical response to a situation of 'domination and conflict'" (25). Again, if we are to eschew binaries, these aesthetic strategies should address multiple vectors of domination and conflict. While the novel of creolization does sometimes address these vectors, its aesthetics and poetics rarely manage to do so.⁶ The prose of Chamoiseau's novels, for instance, is beautifully complex; it is made of degrees of creolized French, meant to underline the difference between classes and their gradated proximity to French and whiteness, ranging from the registers of the Black working class to those of the urban mixed-race elite and the white planter class. Nevertheless, his works speak to two main detrimental trends in the way creolized poetics and aesthetics are read. One centers the relation of power between Black and white people, which erases the role of non-Black, formerly colonized communities in many Creole societies. The other emphasizes the conflict between the center of power and the subaltern, which subsumes the

history of slavery, indenture, and migrancy under one category without accounting for historical and current rifts between various formerly colonized groups. In both cases, the marginalization *and* hegemony of non-Black groups are erased. Consequently, dynamics beyond the Black-white ethnoclass spectrum rarely figure in debates about the historical creolization processes of plantation societies and not at all in readings of creolized aesthetics and poetics.

The abolition of slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century caused a sudden global dearth of free labor. To the threat of a crumbling plantation economy, the British Empire found the solution in indentured servitude, mining one of its most profitable colonies, India, for laborers. Around a million indentured laborers, mostly from the Indian subcontinent, were brought to the British, Dutch, and French colonies of the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific Ocean to replace the formerly enslaved on plantations. This migration spanned the globe and lasted into the twentieth century, changing forever the landscape of plantation modernities. Although indentured labor borrowed many of the structures of slavery, it was not a new form of the slavery that was specifically born out of the transatlantic slave trade.⁷ Many indentured laborers were duped into leaving their homeland under unfair contracts that were sometimes renewed coercively and indefinitely, but unlike the enslaved population, they were paid, even if a pittance, for their labor. The system of indenture also allowed room for laborers to practice their religion and speak their native language, even if under systemic constraints. Nevertheless, in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the urban mixed-raced elite had access to education as well as proximity to whiteness, gaining an advantage over most Indians, who remained on plantations and in rural areas (Van den Avenne 340). Those moving to the city were employed in menial municipal work, as immortalized by the proverb "tout kouli ni an kout twotwè pou I fè" ("every Indian finds themselves someday in front of the gutter"; qtd. in Van den Avenne 340–41). The situation was markedly different in Trinidad and Mauritius, where Indian migrants soon began to outnumber the formerly enslaved. Attributing hegemony solely

to the majority of the population would be an oversimplification in the Mauritian context, where Franco-Mauritians, as a remnant of the colonial legacy, remain the wealthiest group despite constituting a mere two percent of the population (Eriksen 80). Nevertheless, Indo-Mauritians, specifically high-caste Hindus, overrepresented in the government and police force, have acquired political and military hegemony over Black Creoles, who remain, on average, the most economically marginalized.⁸ This ostracization is doubly so for the mostly Black Creole inhabitants of the Outer Islands of Mauritius, such as Rodrigues and Agalega, which are secluded from the mainland and peripheral to dominant narratives of national belonging. Throughout the history of many Creole societies, the initially uneven status between the formerly enslaved and the newly indentured, both subjugated by the white planter class, would continue to give rise to tensions—previously fueled by colonial policies and then exacerbated by imperialist interventions from abroad and neocolonial structures at home.⁹ Parallel to the erasure of this dynamic in debates on creolization is the focus on the relationship between Creole and the colonial language to the detriment of other languages.

European empires differed in their linguistic politics and policies. The British Empire's policy of "differentiation" allowed for the existence of other languages alongside English, some of which thrived after decolonization. The French Empire's linguistic centrism, which perdures even today as French continues to be policed by institutions such as the Académie française, curbed the presence of ancestral languages (Michelman 217–19). As a result, in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Réunion, which are "départements et régions d'outre-mer" ("overseas departments and regions of France"), French and Creole are mostly used. In the former British colonies of Mauritius, Trinidad, and Fiji, along with each island's lingua franca and the language of the former European power, Asian and Indigenous languages are used in a variety of contexts. In Mauritius, although Kreol Morisien is the lingua franca, it is not the polar opposite of French; there is rather a diglossic spectrum on which Kreol Morisien and Asian languages compete

for the same cultural capital allotted to French and, to some extent, to English. Yet the Creole–French debate persists. In parallel, the traditional association of orality with Creole, and textuality with French, also persists, despite evidence to the contrary in Mauritius and beyond. One piece of evidence is the long and rich history of Creole textuality, going all the way back to Alfred Parépou's *Atipa*, written in French Guianese Creole and published in 1885. Another is that Creole orthography is now codified in many of these islands. In Mauritius, Hindu cultural ceremonies and religious rites draw both from the orality of Hindi and Mauritian Bhojpuri (an amalgamation of Indian Bhojpuri and Kreol Morisien) and from the textuality of Sanskrit tomes, as my reading of Devi's *Pagli* shows, rupturing the false dichotomy between orality and writing. A reading practice informed by knowledge of these linguistic and historical particularities is essential in uncovering *Pagli's* latent creolized form, and in liberating it from a universalizing brand of creolization. To complement this practice, instead of invoking a priori, extraneous, global frameworks of creolization, I work to let the novel's own framework emerge from its embedded allegories of textuality.

The Storyteller, the Reader, and a Liberating Reading Practice

The plot of Devi's *Pagli* is set into motion when the eponymous heroine arrives on her wedding day in Terre Rouge, a predominantly Hindu village in the north of Mauritius. The reader will later learn that the marriage, although arranged, in fact aligns with Pagli's plan: molested as a teenager by her male cousin, she marries him in order to avenge herself, by denying him her body and, most importantly in the context of familial expectations, an heir. Resigned to a fate of revenge and resentment, she unexpectedly finds love and happiness when she meets Zil, a Black Creole fisherman from the Outer Islands of Agalega. As a Hindu Indo-Mauritian woman married to a government official of her own community, Pagli oversteps not only marital but racial, religious, and class boundaries by choosing Zil. These two characters' interracial

relationship becomes a nested allegory for the novel's own transgressive creolization, amid a recurring lexicon pertaining to textuality, storytelling, and reading.

Before Pagli is married, her fate is foretold by an old woman whose words are pregnant with meaning: "Il y a encore beaucoup de douleurs qui t'attendent, disait-elle, c'est écrit sur ton front et dans tes mains" ("There is yet more pain waiting for you, she said, it is written on your forehead and in your hands"; 29). The woman's body is here an inscribed object, the immutable inscription fixing her gendered fate. The prediction is given authority by the matriarch's own body, covered with traditional tattoos. At first, Pagli seems to submit to this coercive textuality when she says, "je voyais cet océan de souffrance et je me demandais à quoi cela servait d'être née femme si votre destin s'écrivait en lettres de sang" ("I saw this ocean of suffering and I wondered what the use of being born a woman was if one's destiny was written in bloody letters"; 29). Despite this apparent fatalism, Pagli attributes her gendered fate not to a divine or biological cause but to the conventions and unwritten laws established by men. When she arrives in the village where her wedding will take place, she remarks of the old male villagers, "Mon histoire est inscrite dans leurs yeux. Ils en font partie puisqu'ils ont aidé à établir les lois qui m'ont amené là où je suis" ("My story [or history] is written in their eyes. They are part of it because they helped establish the laws that brought me to where I am"; 15). The ambiguity of "histoire" as both "story" and "history" contextualizes her personal story—her rape and her arranged marriage—within a broader patriarchy.

The emphasis on the male villagers' gaze is not innocuous either. She is not only written on but also read according to the textuality of unwritten social codes and codified patriarchal narratives. The male villagers' gaze prefigures the process of reading to which Pagli's relationship with Zil and, consequently, her sexually transgressive body, will be subjected. When her husband's family condemns her extramarital relationship with Zil, they conjure a repulsive vision of the lovers: "deux corps 'étrangers' qui s'accouplaient" ("two 'foreign' bodies

copulating"; 42). The term "s'accouplaient" ("copulating") evokes, more than physicality, a certain animality. Their physical relationship is further characterized as foreign, accentuated here by the text's quotation marks. This all reveals a fear of miscegenation and more specifically of the Indian woman's sexuality; while the union between an Indian man and a Creole woman might still be considered taboo, the Indian woman's sexual liberation through the Creole man is an added threat to the continuity of racial pedigree. Such images are accompanied by a ritual of inspection, again foregrounded by a practice of writing and reading:

Peu importe ce que vous avez fait ou ce que vous n'avez pas fait, elles vous ouvrent comme un livre et lisent en vous les peurs et les secrets. Elles réveillent des angoisses qui ne vous quitteront plus. Toutes les culpabilités, toutes les hontes retombent sur vous, même si elles ne vous appartiennent pas. Vous êtes obligés de les accepter et de prendre la punition avec humilité. Vous vous rendez compte alors que les pliures du ciel ressemblent à leurs voiles lorsqu'elles plongent sur vous. Et que le soleil a la brûlure de leurs yeux. Vous n'en r échapperez pas. Je le sais, parce que j'ai reçu l'empreinte des mofines. (16)

No matter what you have done or have not done, they [Pagli's in-laws] open you like a book and read in you fears and secrets. They awaken apprehensions that won't leave you. All the guilt, all the shame land on you, even if they don't belong to you. You are forced to accept them and to take the punishment with humility. You realize then that the folds of the sky look like their veils when they come down on you. And that the sun burns like their eyes. You won't survive them. I know it, because I received the imprint of the mofines.¹⁰

Pagli's in-laws open her like a book and, as did the male villagers she encountered on her wedding day, read her according to the patriarchal and communalist conventions they metaphorically write and perpetuate on her body. In this, they fulfill their role as representatives of a broader discourse pervading the island, a role underlined by the synecdochic extension of their eyes and the veil of the saris they

wear over their eyes to the watchful sun and sky of the island, respectively. When Pagli dares write her own trajectory outside the confines of this discourse, “peurs” (“fears”), “culpabilités” (“guilt”), and “honte” (“shame”) are read on her, in an attempt to force her back to these conventions. In brief, the Indo-Mauritian woman’s body is a site on and through which the socioeconomic and cultural status quo of Hindu hegemony is inscribed and maintained.

The heroine’s violations of norms ultimately earn her the sobriquet “Pagli,” or “madwoman” in Hindi and Bhojpuri, a label her in-laws will later brand on her forehead. Written on and read as mad, as a deviance from the hegemony she is supposed to uphold, Pagli is involved in a process of reading and writing that is never an equitable exchange between her and the family; it is an echo chamber from which her voice is absent. But she begins to find her voice in an unlikely place. By the end of the novel, when Pagli is drowning during a flood in the chicken pen to which her in-laws have confined her, she attempts to speak to an absent Zil. This comes back full circle to the first line of the novel: “Ce chant qui me vient du bleu des ombres, je ne sais si tu l’entendras” (“This chant that comes to me from the blue of shadows, I do not know whether you will hear it”; 13). The reader is retrospectively made to realize that Pagli’s attempt to reach out to Zil from inside the pen constitutes the first-person narrative and entire content of the novel. Ultimately then, the novel is Pagli’s quest for a readerly alternative to her in-laws and the broader society in which she lives. Zil responds to this attempt and refuses to read and address her as Pagli, the madwoman, choosing instead to use her real name, Daya, the Hindi word for “compassion.” As she says to him, “tu me libères de mon nom” (“you free me from my name”; 39). Already an implicit reader of Pagli’s narrative, Zil will further be shown to be an integral part of the textuality of *Pagli* in even more ostentatious ways, as an agent of creolization specifically.

Earlier in the novel Pagli’s in-laws threaten to have her interned in “un asile” (“a mental asylum”), but they end up forcing her into the chicken pen in their own backyard, no doubt to be able to exert

further control over her. Along with naming the heroine and branding her with the name Pagli, this physical internment is meant to remind her of her transgression of a certain order: “[u]ne voix m’appelle Pagli. Encore et encore, comme pour me rappeler à l’ordre” (“a voice calls me Pagli. Again and again, as if to call me to order”; 30). The use of “ordre” here posits a specific discursive order: that of reason, which is the acknowledgment of and complete submission to the rules of monogamy in order to further racial and class purity. As she is being forced into the pen, Pagli muses, “Vous me mettez dans un asile? Je réponds, souriant de ma plaisanterie, mais je suis déjà à Zil. . . . Et je chante à mi-voix: À Zil, à Zil, à Zil. . . .” (“You will put me in an asylum? I answer, smiling at my own joke, but I already belong to Zil. . . . And I hum quietly: To Zil, to Zil, to Zil. . . .”; 112). Pagli’s coerced confinement in the chicken pen is meant to police her and keep her separate from Zil, but the paronomastic equation of “asile” (“asylum”) with “à Zil” (“belonging to Zil”) instead strengthens her union with him.

The naming and branding of Pagli as the madwoman paradoxically recall her to the order of reason while allowing her to inhabit the realm of unreason, where she can continue to transgress racial and class boundaries. Likewise, her confinement to the pen physically shackles her to the family compound, but it also allows her to open up a breach into the Hindu household, here synonymous with Hindu hegemony, in order to invite an other, Zil. Zil is, of course, not only Creole but also from Agalega, which constitutes a double alterity.¹¹ This is where we start to get to the crux of Pagli and Zil’s relationship as a metaphor for the creolized poetics of the novel. The chicken pen within the family compound signifies a space of unreason opened up inside the site of reason, through Pagli’s first-person narrative to Zil. Her body, sexually tied to Zil, and her voice, directed at Zil, are the Trojan horse that allows the contamination of Hindu hegemony, the subversion of old socioeconomic hierarchies. But of course, this powerful prestidigitation is facilitated by the pun on “asile” and “à Zil.” In brief, the constellation linking “Pagli,” “Zil,”

“à Zil,” and “asile” is possible only through the entanglement of Hindi and Bhojpuri, Kreol Morisien and French, and legible only by means of the layers of Mauritian linguistic multiplicities and possibilities. Yet this is only a brief glimpse into the linguistic virtuosity of Devi's novel. If we follow Zil and read *Pagli*'s body and name in ways that liberate her, and like him we perform a liberating reading, but of *Pagli* the text instead, we begin to peel away the layers of novelistic expectations and linguistic conventions and discover clues to the novel's critical nature.

We might start with the two moments that are most illustrative of *Pagli*'s innovative creolized textuality. Appropriately, these are moments that evoke the physical communion between *Pagli* and her lover, when *Pagli*'s body, initially a site through which Hindu dominance is maintained, turns into a site of transformative creolization—for both *Pagli* and *Pagli*. The first and most important one takes place when their physical union is intricately described for the first time. The second, on which I will linger first, occurs when *Pagli* finds out she is potentially pregnant, toward the end of the novel, when she is drowning in the chicken pen. Descriptions of and around the child are hedged by textual metaphors:

et l'île, la vraie, point vert, point de magnificence, point d'interrogation, point de suspension nous pouvons enfin y être nous
 au coeur de nos certitudes reconnaissance de notre nous
 et d'un enfant de dentelle fine si fine si délicate qu'elle en est invisible un tissage d'imperceptible de nos doigts immatériels
 enfin (154)

and the island, the real one, green dot, dot of magnificence, dot of interrogation [or question mark], dot of suspension [or ellipsis] we can finally be us here

at the heart of our certainties recognition of our us
 and of a child of lace fine so fine so delicate that she is invisible a weaving of the imperceptible from our immaterial hands
 finally

The term “tissage” (“weaving”) invokes an old literary metaphor linking text and textile. This is not an uncommon one in Devi's novels, as Lionnet has demonstrated, with her powerful reading of the sari, the ubiquitous Indian garb of Devi's work, as an allegory for textuality (“Cinq Mètres”). John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro remind us that the Latin word *texere* is the common root for both *textile* and *text*, implying that “to weave” is akin “to compos[ing] a written work” (137). They cite a related term in one of Luxurius's poems, “retexis,” literally “you reweave,” or as they and other critics interpret it, “you read.” They elaborate on the metaphor: “writing constitutes the warp of a fabric into which the reader inserts his own vocal woof. . . . Writing needs the reading voice in order to realize itself as ‘fabric’” (152). Similarly, *Pagli* and Zil's unborn child, described as “un tissage d'imperceptible” (“a weaving of the imperceptible”), is the fabric she weaves toward Zil. It is no coincidence that *Pagli* feels the child stirring inside her when she is confined in the chicken pen, at the same time that she begins to weave her story, her “chant,” toward her “reader,” Zil. The epigraph of the novel, “tout roman est un acte d'amour” (“every novel is an act of love”; Devi, *Pagli* 9), then takes on its full meaning: both the child and the text are acts of love born out of *Pagli* and Zil's relationship. These acts of love are also acts of defiance. The child is the “point d'interrogation, point de suspension” (“dot of interrogation [or question mark], dot of suspension [or ellipsis]”) that interrogates and temporarily suspends the antimiscegenation discourses of a communalist and racist island, so that an Indian woman and a Creole man can envisage a different Mauritius: “nous pouvons enfin y être nous” (“we can finally be us here”). In this sense, the “point vert, point de magnificence” (“green dot, dot of magnificence”)—an obvious reference to Mauritius both as a verdant and beautiful tropical island and as a dot on the world map—is rewritten through the textual metaphor of the embryonic “point” (“dot”) that is the nascent progeny. Allegorized by the mixed-race child, the creolized aesthetics of Devi's novel enacts both a tissage and a métissage—a play on words made by Lionnet in her scholarly

work¹²—of the text that weave together racial, linguistic, and literary categories to neutralize their dominating power.

A Métissage Worthy of the Complexity and Specificity of Creole Societies

The dissident function of the novel is to be found at its best in a chapter of the novel aptly titled “Zil,” and in that chapter’s strategic placement in the novel. Written as a stream of consciousness with no punctuation except toward the end, “Zil” describes, in highly poetic language, the physical union between Zil and Pagli. It exceeds its descriptive function when it mimics, in its rhythm and form, the lovers’ physical climax:

mains dévergondes jambes buissonnières lèvres adhérees nous ne pouvons plus partir tu dis mon nom et cela ressemble à une lumière je dis ton nom et cela ressemble à un cri d’oiseau je n’en peux plus essoufflée créée créée soulevée irradiée déferlée—

et enfin nous glissons ensemble dans le sommeil et, pour la première fois depuis des années, je dors. (85)

depraved hands shifting legs conjoined lips we can no longer leave you say my name and it looks like a light I say your name and it sounds like a bird cry I cannot anymore breathless created screamed lifted irradiated crashed—

and finally we slide into sleep together and, for the first time in years, I sleep.

The end of the chapter, quoted here, gathers momentum until it achieves an urgent tone with its uninterrupted string of qualifiers, “essoufflée créée créée soulevée irradiée déferlée” (“breathless created screamed lifted irradiated crashed”). This culminates in a peak, implied by the dash, which is, significantly, the first punctuation mark of the chapter. More punctuation marks then follow to structure the prose into a leisurely, repetitive lull. The rhythm of Pagli and Zil’s physical union is echoed by the cadence of the writing: intensification, culmination, and jouissance, followed by repose with the last

three lines. The poetry of the chapter marks a definite shift from the tone of the rest of the novel, and especially of the chapter immediately preceding it, “La cérémonie” (“The Ceremony”). “La cérémonie,” which details Pagli’s wedding to her husband, indicates her detachment toward both wedding and husband through the impersonal tone of the definite article in its title. Chronologically, the sexual encounter between Pagli and Zil in “Zil” does not immediately follow Pagli’s wedding in “La cérémonie.” The chapters are instead strategically placed one after the other to signify a fundamental shift for Pagli and a key moment in the novel, when she rejects marital unhappiness for extramarital happiness, and her nonconsummated marriage is followed by consummation with Zil. Through a textual sleight of hand, Zil is admitted into the sacred marital event, which is reserved, by convention, for Pagli’s husband.

This textual transgression is, however, more complex. A thorough comparison of the two chapters, informed by a knowledge of local Hindu traditions, reveals that the substitution of Pagli’s Hindu Indo-Mauritian husband with her Creole lover from Agalega subverts a broader political, class, and linguistic hierarchy dividing Hindus and Creoles in Mauritius. This is accomplished in a creative blend of political critique and aesthetic strategy. In “La cérémonie,” the priest who officiates the wedding asks Pagli to repeat a Sanskrit verse from the wedding ritual, according to which the woman vows fidelity to her husband. Instead, she responds with her own sermons in Kreol Morisien: “Mo priye pu mo gagn kuraz dir non. Pu ki mo tuzur mazinn mo duler. Pu mo kapav get mo mari en fas e ki li lir mo laenn dans mo lizie. Mo priye pu mo pa swiv simen fam, simen mama, sime belmer” (“I pray for the courage to say no. To always remember my pain. To look at my husband face-to-face so he can read my hatred in my eyes. I pray I don’t follow the path of women, the path of mothers, the path of mothers-in-law”; 75). Pagli categorically refuses to repeat the vows and, consequently, refuses Indo-Mauritian traditions that would ascribe to her the historical “simen fam, simen mama, sime belmer” (“the path of women, the path of mothers, the path of mothers-in-law”). Likewise, she refuses

the language of the vows. She consciously rejects Sanskrit for Kreol Morisien, which calls attention to the layered linguistic landscape of Mauritius and to a diglossia other than the usual one involving the colonizing language and the local Creole. Even though the lingua franca in Mauritius is Kreol Morisien, Hindu ceremonial chants and prayers are still performed by officiants in the traditional Sanskrit, understood mainly by priests and scholars. While explanations are sometimes provided in Hindi, understood by many Indo-Mauritians, or in Kreol Morisien, the prayers are expected to be in Sanskrit, revered by Indo-Mauritians for its ties to Hindu sacrality, its origin in the Indian motherland, and, no doubt, its exclusivity.¹³ Kreol Morisien, the language of all, is, by contrast, often dismissed as a dialect, a patois.

The irreverence that Pagli shows for the sanctity of Sanskrit wedding rites when she counters them with her own words in Kreol Morisien will spill over into the next chapter, “Zil.” “Zil” contains a line that will grab the attention of the reader familiar with Hindu wedding rituals: “il n’était pas nécessaire de nous attacher l’un à l’autre nous le sommes déjà au contraire” (“it was not necessary to tie us together we already were on the contrary”; 85). Beyond poetizing Pagli’s bond with Zil, this line refers to a specific custom in Hindu weddings, which involves tying a piece of the bride’s and groom’s clothes together to symbolize the beginning of their marital bond. In “Zil,” this ritual is reinvented in the service of Pagli and Zil’s relationship, not bound by shared religion, ethnicity, and class, but by love. This is in line with an important symmetry that emerges between the two chapters, in which “Zil” simultaneously echoes and dismantles “La cérémonie.” This symmetry, as others have remarked, generally inhabits the broader architecture of the novel: “La cérémonie” ends the first half of the novel, which details the heroine’s subjugation under her in-laws, while “Zil” begins the second half, which undoes this subjugation to usher in a new, liberating phase (Jean-François 58). While the two chapters refract each other at various levels, in the story and through the novel’s architecture, this refraction proves to be the most potent and transformative in the novel’s

aesthetics. This is revealed through a close reading of the chapter “Zil.”

Whereas Pagli and Zil’s unborn child is characterized by a glossary of punctuation marks that question and rewrite the racist and communalist narratives in Mauritius, here too punctuation—or rather its absence—marks a transgressive textuality, from which emerges an alternative Mauritian nationhood. Described as “un poème sans rime et sans punctuation” (“a poem with no rhyme or punctuation”; Devi, *Pagli* 83), the chapter takes off with the second line, after the word “Zil,” and is uninterrupted by the pause of punctuation until the very end. No doubt, on the one hand the style of this particular chapter immediately reminds the Western canon reader of the likes of James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Samuel Beckett in its disregard for punctuation. To the expert of Indic scripture, on the other hand, it emulates the rhythm of Sanskrit, with breaks gleaned from the meaning of phrases rather than from punctuation.¹⁴ This is not to say, necessarily, that these are misreadings of *Pagli*. After all, Devi is a reader of both Western and Indian classics.¹⁵ But my goal from the outset has been to favor local intertextualities, which are erased when more explicit ones are emphasized by dominant theories of creolization. It has been to understand the novel’s aesthetics in its local context in the predominantly Hindu north of Mauritius where the novel is set, rather than in relation to a Western canon or to an essentialized understanding of Indian references. When the chapter is read alongside local artifacts and practices, it produces a more nuanced and much richer conversation.

Growing up as a Hindu Indo-Mauritian, I distinctly remember the striking layout of pages in the daily prayer books and wedding booklets belonging to my uncle, who was a Hindu priest, and to my mother. In the pages of these books published and republished by smaller printing presses in both India and Mauritius, and used extensively in religious ceremonies in Mauritius, the placement of the word *om* is significant. *Om* (or its alternative spelling *aum*) is often used as a page heading and then repeated as the first word of the first mantra. Similarly, in *Pagli*’s seminal chapter, “Zil,” Zil’s

name appears at the top of the page as the title of the chapter and is repeated as the first word of the chapter. Standing on its own, this one word calibrates the rest of the chapter, mimicking a musical tonic note that begins and sets the key of the entire song, or in this case of the chant, mimicking the arrangement of the sacred Hindu symbol *om* in written transliterations of religious chants.¹⁶ *Zil* is made to function in the life of *Pagli* and on the pages of *Pagli* in the same ways that *om* visually and aurally inhabits Hindu chants, prayers, sacraments, and temple walls.¹⁷ In this way, the wedding vows *Pagli* is originally told to repeat verbatim in “La cérémonie,” which she initially rejects, are here transgressively recast and inaugurated with the name of her Creole lover instead of the symbol revered by Hindus, in a simultaneous sanctification of their relationship and desacralization of the Sanskrit religious rite. The enmeshment of orality with the written register that already infuses the entire first-person narrative, significantly characterized as “un chant” (“a chant”; 13) on the very first page of the novel, is here emphasized with the evocative presence of the Sanskrit chant-text in “*Zil*.” The chapter “*Zil*,” which appears at first glance to be an exercise in creative license—certainly nothing new in a French-language novel—is, if read from the perspective of the local, a recuperation and transformation of the hegemony of French textuality and a subversion of Sanskrit sacralization.

In Praise of Creolizations

“*Zil*” manifests a unique creolization of form and aesthetics in the text, transcending the binaries of the Creole society archetype that the readership of the novel of creolization has come to expect. It accounts for the complex racial history of these societies by engaging in a true reckoning of the hierarchies within creolization specific to Mauritius. It does not suffice that the oral rhythm of Sanskrit and its written conventions in Hindu texts are made to subvert the French language—the use of which is particularly tenuous in former colonies—and Western novelistic conventions. After all, this is not new in itself. Many postcolonial writers have

rightly exercised this kind of creative—and political—license by melding two languages to subvert the vertical relationship between the former center of power and the postcolony. The novelty here is that the same Sanskrit textuality that transforms the French text is unraveled too.

The celebration of the Creole lover by invocation of a language sacred to Hindus questions the hegemony of Sanskrit over Kreol Morisien and, by association, of Hindu Indo-Mauritians over Creoles. In the same way that *Pagli* in the chicken pen invokes *Zil* to undermine the power of Hindu dominance from within its bastion—the Indo-Mauritian family unit—the poeticization of the Creole figure and the transformation of Sanskrit internally undermine linguistic and cultural centers of power. Skirting a universalizing dichotomy of colonizer and colonized, French and Creole, oral and written, this creolization of aesthetics is able to honor the convoluted hierarchies of race and language unique to Mauritius. In creating new aesthetic landscapes that elude or resist dominant ways of understanding creolization, *Pagli* makes an important epistemological intervention. It does not prescribe a novel literary creolization, but instead suggests space for context-dependent creolizations. Reflecting on *créolité*, Maryse Condé finds that it proposes a normative “authenticity” that excludes other modes of writing (106). She asks, “aren’t there new and multiple versions of *créolité*?” (109). And one might ask more broadly, aren’t there new and multiple versions of creolization?

NOTES

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1. One of the exceptions is the work of the literary scholar Françoise Lionnet, who generally challenges and expands popular conceptions of creolization. She has also been an incisive reader of *Devi*, especially in her essay “Cinq Mètres d’Ordre et de Sagesse, . . . Cinq Mètres de Jungle Soyeuse”: Ananda Devi’s Unfurling

Art of Fiction," where she reads the sari in Devi's novels as an allegory for her narrative aesthetics.

2. For a detailed study of the construction of Mauritian nationhood around the notion of the "rainbow nation" since its independence, see Lionnet, "Matière à photographie."

3. I use the term *Creole* for all Creole languages originating from former plantation societies, and the term *Kreol Morisien* specifically for the Mauritian brand of Creole, as per the local orthography.

4. In their introduction to *Minor Transnationalism*, Lionnet and Shih rightly move away from vertical conversations—literary and otherwise—between the formerly colonized and the historical center of power. They instead highlight, through the lens of "minor transnationalism," horizontal ones within networks of the Global South. But even these networks can conceal internal imbalances, as in the case of Mauritius and India. The Indian influences in Devi's works have often been studied in relation to the mythologies and epics of an essentialized India, the motherland revered by Indo-Mauritians. This is, to some extent, encouraged by Devi herself: one of her novels is titled *Le voile de Draupadi* (1993; *Draupadi's Veil*), after the tragic heroine of the Mahabharata, and she admits to the general influence of such Hindu epics on her work (see, for instance, Devi, "Entretien"). For an analysis of the influences of Hindu traditions and Indian legends on *Pagli*, see Waters; Tyagi. However, since emphasis on influences originating from the Indian subcontinent can overshadow local textualities, my essay intentionally favors the local, Mauritian brand of Hindu practices and textualities.

5. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

6. In the Martinican novelist Raphaël Confiant's impressive array of more than fifty works, members of minority groups in Martinique feature mostly as minor characters until *La panse du chacal* (2004; *The Jackal's Belly*), *Case à Chine* (2007; *Chinese Shack*), and *Rue des Syriens* (2012; *Syrian Street*), which focus on Martinicans of Indian, Chinese, and Levantine descent, respectively, and on their roles in the historical processes of creolization. In these works, Confiant finally gives a long overdue place of honor to the minority cultures of the French Caribbean in his "Comédie creole" ("Creole comedy," a term Confiant fashions after Balzac's "Comédie humaine") and in the literature of créolité. Nevertheless, the contribution of these cultures remains absent from the poetic and aesthetic dimension of his fictional works.

7. In 1974, Tinker published *A New System of Slavery*, a comprehensive study on Indian indentured labor. Carter; Lal; Allen; and Bahadur (*Coolie Woman*) have since provided excellent scholarship on the complex system of indenture and its differences and parallels with slavery. My own conclusion is that although indentured labor from India followed the abolition of slavery in several parts of the world and borrowed many of its structures, it was not a new form of the slavery that was specifically born out of the transatlantic slave trade. In addition, the history of indentured servitude from colonial India can and indeed should be considered as its own unique case, with its own systemic oppressive structures to be condemned, and it should be studied in relation to but not as a continuation of slavery.

8. It is important to note here that the colonial term *Creole* is polysemous in its evolution and has come to be a signifier for different, sometimes contradictory, notions in Creole-speaking communities. In Mauritius, it denotes a specific ethnic group—the Black community of Mauritius, as well as the lingua franca, Kreol Morisien, spoken by everyone regardless of race and ethnicity. When applied to the Black community, the term *Creole*, according to Vaughan, is both a racial and a residual category in Mauritius: "they are neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Tamils nor Chinese nor 'whites' of either the Franco or Anglo variety. The Creole community is the residue of these racial/ethnic/cultural categories, a residue that purportedly lacks a distinct culture and suffers from what is known as 'la malaise créole,' a 'disease' not only of poverty, but of social marginality and abjection" (3).

9. The French Caribbean general strikes in 2009, which were about the standard of living and a demand for a salary increase for low-income workers, exposed substantial class and race disparities; the French government pacified protesters with promises that came to nothing. After Guyana achieved independence in the 1960s, the elected Indo-Guyanese prime minister, Cheddi Jagan, was ousted by the Afro-Guyanese Forbes Burnham, whose regime was marked by violence and corruption and an exodus of predominantly Indo-Guyanese citizens. Burnham was backed by the British and US governments to depose the Marxist Jagan (Bahadur, "CIA Meddling"). Mauritius has been marked by pre- and postindependence racial tensions between the Hindu Indo-Mauritian majority and its Creole and Muslim minority groups in the 1960s and 1970s and by racial riots in 1999 when the Creole musician Kaya died in police custody in highly suspicious circumstances.

10. *Pagli* uses the term *mofines*, a term for "bad luck" in Kreol Morisien, to refer to her husband's family throughout the novel.

11. Zil's name, which means "island" in Kreol Morisien, could be short for "zilwa" ("islander"), the derogatory label given to people who hail from the Outer Islands of Mauritius, Agalega included. These islands present economic, social, and cultural landscapes drastically different from those of the main island. Officially part of Mauritius, and yet made peripheral to the main island by the designation "Outer Islands," they constitute others within a broader Mauritian nationhood. Not only does Zil threaten Hindu dominance, but he is a reminder of all the Outer "zils" whose presence irks the narrative of the Mauritian "nation arc-en-ciel" ("rainbow nation").

12. Lionnet contends that the postcolonial subject, when writing, is "adept at braiding all the traditions at its disposal, using the fragments that constitute it in order to participate fully in a dynamic process of transformations" (*Postcolonial Representations* 5). Following Glissant, she emphasizes the "tissage" in "mé-tissage" as a critical reading praxis and "a form of intertextual weaving" (*Autobiographical Voices* 29).

13. The anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr documents the case of a priest in La Nicolière—a village found, like the Terre Rouge of *Pagli*, in the northern and predominantly Hindu parts of Mauritius—who preached sermons in Kreol Morisien instead of Sanskrit and was ardently protested by worshippers (988).

14. Punctuation in Sanskrit is virtually absent in early texts and informal and sporadic in general (Salomon 66).

15. For further information in this regard, see Devi's autobiographical *Les hommes qui me parlent* (*The Men Who Speak to Me*), published in 2011, and her interview with Alessandro Corio in 2005 ("Entretien").

16. The layout of the chapter is mirrored by another chapter in the novel, "Daya," in which Zil professes his love for Pagli. Although "Daya," unlike "Zil," contains traditional punctuation, the name of a main character functions as the title as well as the first word in both chapters.

17. This is especially true of the Arya Samaj movement, a Hindu denomination introduced in Mauritius in the nineteenth century, whose very flag is adorned with *om*. This reform monotheist movement, while coexisting with polytheist Hinduism in Mauritius, rejects the worship of idols and proposes a belief in one God, referred to through the visual and aural syllable *om*.

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Abstract: As the literature of Creole societies severed ties with colonial literary models, a new literature conceptualized through scholarly and literary conversations on creolization emerged. In a zeal to amplify Creole solidarity against colonial dominance, however, these conversations unfortunately erased the internal hierarchies and linguistic unevenness among the formerly colonized, uniting them all under the banner of the Creole language. The aesthetics of the literature of creolization is consequently read through the lens of a strict dichotomy opposing the colonized, Creole, and orality to the hegemony of the colonizer, the colonizing language, and writing. Reading the Mauritian novelist Ananda Devi's *Pagli* (2001) in depth, I reveal a novel that goes against this trend and bears witness, through its very textuality, to the complexity of racial and linguistic stratifications in Creole societies, without flattening them into dichotomies. In this light, it constitutes a necessary theoretical intervention in the field of creolization aesthetics.