

***American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South* edited by Martin Munro and Celia Britton**

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Munro, Martin and Celia Britton (eds.). 2012. *American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 256 pp., £65.00 hardcover.



Francophone and Postcolonial criticism is an ever-expanding field of study. The new edited volume *American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South* functions as a lens to bring into sharper focus the geographical, cultural, and linguistic connections between the French-speaking Caribbean and the American South. Working in the same vein as other influential scholars,¹ Martin Munro and Celia Britton, the editors of the text, search out and record new disciplinary terrain by tying together several geographical spaces with a shared history of colonialism and slavery. The volume relies on triangular geographical and linguistic matrices between Africa, the Caribbean, and France to establish the “circum-Caribbean”—a theoretical space encompassing the Caribbean and, eventually, the neighboring southern United States. As in Édouard Glissant’s analysis of William Faulkner’s oeuvre, Munro and Britton explore new ways for scholars to interpret notions like *creoleness* through the cultural and historical optic of plantation societies throughout the hemisphere.

Munro and Britton, as well as the contributing authors, have inscribed a fresh angle for analyzing texts from the Caribbean and the American South by acknowledging the “semantic instability of the term *Creole*” (Munro and Britton 5, Introduction; emphasis added) *American Creoles* is a volume that seeks to problematize and build on the concepts of “Creole” and “Creoleness” introduced in the seminal text *In Praise of Creoleness* by Jean

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Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant.² Munro and Britton argue, like Maryse Condé (Munro and Britton 4, Introduction), that by complicating definitions put forth by thinkers like Bernabé et al. and Édouard Glissant, one can accommodate a sliding scale of Creole culture and identity that includes the circum-Caribbean rather than just the Antilles. *American Creoles* also destabilizes our notions of text and textual analysis, considering not only literature, but also music; professional and amateur ethnography; theater; journalism; autobiography; and political slogans in order to suggest new ways in which Francophone and Postcolonial studies can evolve. By diverting their attention towards these other fields, the editors characterize the circum-Caribbean as a polyvocal and polyglot space, demanding scholarship that addresses this multiplicity of academic disciplines and analytical perspectives.

American Creoles is organized into three main sections: Creolizations, Music, and "Intertextualities." The Creolizations section features two of the collection's strongest essays by Mary Gallagher and Valérie Loichot. Gallagher's analysis of Lafcadio Hearn's writing allows her to plot out the idea of a "creole continuum," a type of cultural crossing that predates modern theories of "creoleness" (Gallagher 20). In a similar vein, Loichot turns to the French print-news coverage of the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, arguing that the French language is ill-equipped to describe Barack Obama's creoleness. In the book's music section, Jeremy Lane's piece takes an oppositional stance towards the recent scholarship on Frantz Fanon by reading the interstices of Fanon's writing. In an attempt to address a gap in scholarship on the Martinican writer, Lane critiques work by Fanon's biographer David Macey and preeminent postcolonial scholar Françoise Vergès, both of whom have either written off or ignored Fanon's references to jazz music. Lane argues that Fanon's brief, yet pertinent references to jazz are an essential element to the exploration of his own French Antillean identity, his political activism in Algeria, and his exploration of global systems of oppression in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean (Lane 144). The final section, entitled "Intertextualities," designates Édouard Glissant's *Faulkner, Mississippi* as the seminal text in establishing connections between the Caribbean and the American South. *Faulkner, Mississippi* is the central focus of Michael Wiedorn's article, where he argues that Glissant's text is his own theory of *opacité* in praxis, altering the way we read Glissantian literary criticism as a self-reflexive meta-gesture. Celia Britton's chapter embodies the thesis elaborated in the volume's introduction, bringing together Faulkner, Glissant, and Condé to cite the plantation as a space for reading and grouping texts from different contexts. Finally, one of the volume's most interesting gestures is the placement of Yanick Lahens's "An American Story" as the book's final entry. By concluding their volume with a story from 2014 *Prix Femina* winner Lahens, Munro and Britton further stress the literary connection between the American South and the Caribbean as part of the same "creolizing archipelago" (Azarad 200).³

Through featuring essays from both emerging and established critics in various fields

of French and Francophone studies, Munro and Britton provide a space where disciplinary boundaries can expand. In order to create such a realm, the editors rely on their undeniably strong introductory essay to contextualize and justify the mission of *American Creoles*. The introduction provides a concise literary review of recent studies that also use a familiar gesture in postcolonial criticism of “filling in voids,” while creating new frames of study in the process. In order to break new ground in Francophone Postcolonial Studies, Munro and Britton have assembled a variety of critical perspectives on circum-Caribbean culture, music, and politics, which are often ignored by scholars in favor of classical literary or film criticism. The outcome of *American Creoles* is praiseworthy. Its editors and contributors analyze the need for a paradigm shift in postcolonial studies, encouraging rather than rejecting cultural crossing as a revelatory gesture.

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Notes

¹Charles Forsdick and David Murphy’s volume *Postcolonial Thought in the French Speaking World* (2009) and Christopher Miller’s *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (2008) are among the texts that Munro and Britton argue have prepared the ground for further research in French and Francophone Postcolonial criticism in the past decade.

² For Bernabé et al. “Creoleness” means to accept the linguistic and cultural heritage as a way of establishing one Antillean identity based on a Caribbean experience, Bernabé, Jean, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël. *Éloge de la créolité*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1993.

³ Yanick Lahens was awarded the 2014 Prix Femina for her novel *Bain de Lune* (2014) published by Sabine Wespieser Éditeur.