

Transfigurations of Modern Time: The Cultural Economy of Creoleness in La Reunion

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Summary

While an ambivalent concept emanating from various historical, political and academic realms, the idea of Creoleness has today widely entered the common sense and can be seen as formative of contemporary forms of social life in different places of the world. Creoleness appears here as a leitmotif of a modern mythical universe through which to think time and the mysteries of origin, as well the separations that mark contemporary society and to propose an outlook for the future. In the particular case of the Indian Ocean island of La Réunion, elevated as a 'model' for the world, the performance of Creoleness has become part of a new form of cultural economy. The island and its populations are made here transfigurations of this mythical universe into socially and materially embodied images, elements of a 'human garden' cultivated and accessed by the mediators of Western modernity as a means to connect to, think and renew conceptions of time and being. Within the island, in turn, the production and supply of images of Creoleness paradoxically becomes a means to access modernity, seen here as a social and symbolic realm defined within the local common sense. Within this context, the model underlying the 'global' economy of Creoleness appears telescoped at the local scale. The social embodiments of Creoleness – mountainous areas and populations which are sights and signs of an initial separation of nature and culture within the Creoleness mythical universe; coastal areas and populations which here are sights and signs of the melanges and creolisations of human history – become elevated as signs of modernity within a local conception of being. Creoleness, through its embodiments, thus has moved from a popular concept to define colonial periphery via an academic category in linguistics and anthropology to a highly ambivalent sign economy as part of contemporary formations of modernity.