

A Space Gallery
Toronto, On

The Mix: Conversations on Creolization and Artist-Community
Collaboration

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The Cameron House
408 Queen Street West, Toronto

Chewing on the Mix: Creolization, power and art

by Honor Ford-Smith

Christopher Cozier's installation "The Attack of the Sandwich Men" features a hundred identical white bread sandwiches wrapped in grease paper, sporting miniature flags of Trinidad and Tobago. They spread out across the gallery floor like a fleet of tiny ships engaged in a military maneuver on a scale befitting Gulliver's Lilliput. A soprano delicately warbles the national anthem of Trinidad and Tobago with much vibrato. The experience is completed by repeating video images of cheaply made hot concrete boxes which profiteering housing developers have visited like the plague on Caribbean people since the mid twentieth century.

The swirl of sandwiches arcing northward like sailboats destined for North America conjures up the exodus of once colonized people to northern white majority societies, the process that the poet Louise Bennett long ago called "colonization in reverse". The presence of Cozier's work here in Canada represents an attempt to bring together artists and communities with links to the Caribbean in an exploration of transnational movement, cultural production and creolization. In the context of a post 911 world we need every chance for reflection on these issues. The exhibition itself raises questions about uprooting, diaspora, and belonging and the ways these affect artistic interventions and everyday meaning making. Andrea Fatona whose brainchild the project was, explains:

Bringing the exhibition here raised a whole set of questions around being an artist in Canada and infusing Canadian cultural space with other cultural forms. The exhibition opened up a space for talking about that. It opened up a space for asking whether there was another way of speaking about multi ethnic societies without invoking Canadian state policies on multiculturalism. Are there, for example, lessons from the concept of creolization that could be helpful for those of us grappling with issues of working across difference?

(Andrea Fatona interview with Honor Ford-Smith, 2004)

Fatona also organized a public discussion about all this to accompany the exhibition. One

brutally cold night in January 2004, a panel made up of Caribbean Canadian artists Richard Fung, Michelle Mohabeer, cultural critic Rinaldo Walcott, and Christopher Cozier met at Cameron House to talk about the meaning of creolization both for Canada and the Caribbean with an audience of artists, students and others not so easily categorized. The panel was called **The Mix**. In what follows I add my own voice to the panelists' efforts to make sense of creolization placing it in the context of current debates on hybridity and transculturation.

Creolization and its cousins - hybridity and transculturation - are abstract concepts which scholars have devised to make sense of complicated and unruly interactions between national, racial and other social groups in the everyday. The terms have their differences, but they also share in common the idea that with cultural uprooting comes an encounter between racial and cultural groups which results in cultural borrowing, appropriations, and re-combinations. Hybridity, some suggest, is politically and culturally potent, a crucible for new identities, cultural change and new ideas about democracy.

For artists and writers located in Canada, interest in creolization represents a search for an alternative to exclusive national narratives and racialized colonial images as well as attempts to find ways to encourage new forms of identification and affiliation which avoid the traps of nationalism. This desire is a response to present global conditions in which dramatic capital expansion accompanied by American imperial domination have produced both cultural standardization and a resurgence of virulent nationalisms. New ideas about cultural mixing have to be explored in the context of these developments.

Why Creolization now? The Mix in context

With increased migration of peoples across borders in the context of globalization, cultural producers in white majority societies have become interested in hybridity and the challenge this poses to homogenous concepts of nation and governance. These challenges and opportunities are created by heightened contact between racial, national and other social groups particularly in large cities like Toronto. You have only to ride the subway once in Toronto to come face to face with this confluence of difference, this cacaphony of languages, these clashing silhouettes of shape colour and style. Here in Toronto in a class room in Caribbean studies or in a patty shop in Kensington Market, you meet a new group called by the new appellation "Caribbeans" - people of all races, sexes, classes, linguistic groupings and nations of the region plus its neighbors; some are born here, some there. Some embracing a new hyphenated identity and others clinging to one part of their history rather than another. The multiple claims of these groups on and beyond the states they live between destabilize fixed ideas of nation, essential categories of citizenship and identity.

One of the key sites where for this voicing of difference can be heard has been in the arts. We have only to remember the fights over performances like Showboat, the exhibition "Into the Heart of Africa" or the challenges to the Canada Council from artists of color. We can also see the many cultural references in the work of artists like Richard Fung, Ali Kazemi, Monique Mohica, Sarindar Dhaliwal and Dionne Brand all of whom work on the divergences and convergences of multiple national and cultural questions on their work. Cultural production has outstripped the formal political sector in registering Canada's shifting image. But while Canadian cultural products have diversified, formal cultural and political institutions remain

resolutely white. Asking ourselves why this is so may be key to the understanding the limitations of cultural discourse and the ways it circumscribes artistic intervention here in Canada.

Creolization and hybridity are first and foremost methods of survival, as Cozier reminded us at **The Mix**. But survival doesn't automatically lead to changes in the violent relations which drive this process of uprooting and mixing. Nor does it automatically lead to challenges to exploitation and marginalization. Such challenges have to be fought for by people who consciously decide to do so. Evacuated of context and robbed of a critique of power and privilege in which borrowing and mixing takes place, cultural hybridity loses its socially transformative edge, and becomes a romance of mixture, subject to appropriation by the status quo.

Cozier described at **The Mix** how in the 1960s in Trinidad, school lunch of sandwiches, implied a rejection of homemade traditional staples like roti or salt fish and fry dumplin and the digestion of imported betterment. To hell with food security. The sandwich was a symbol of participation in the modernist project of consumption. A choice in favor of bland store bought food, implied money in your pocket - status. Eating sandwiches meant swallowing progress accompanied by performances of shopping at the supermarket - just as in American TV commercials. It is what the sandwiches and the concrete box houses obliterate that speaks through its absence. What we see is the banality of the state in the context of globalization mimicking "proper development" What does this say about creolization? Well to me it says that there is no creolization only market domination and imitation. It provokes in me a desire to do something different. This, I think is what is important about the work.

The exhibition itself was just one of a series of moves which Fatona's project made, as a whole. It brought together Caribbean artists located here and there - something rare and much needed if the concept of diaspora is to have any political force. It created a context for its reception (through the panel) and by the bringing together of a number of different constituencies who rarely talk or organize activities together - artists, students and members of community based organization. Discussing the exhibition alongside debates on creolization opened up a space for diasporic groups to think about identities here and there and how we are implicated in matters of nation and commodification. It was a chance to talk about how we here collude with exclusions and elitist practices there, and how we might do something different and what that might lead to in the current context - in Canada, the Caribbean, in the academy, the community based organization and in cultural production.

The Mix points to a small opening in a wall. An opening that speaks to all the hungry possibility that Toronto as context has to offer at this moment (it may not last long): a simultaneously new and old space, a site of border crossings, losses and meetings full of ghosts of past and future longings. For a moment, this moment, in the bringing together of this extraordinary cacaphony of differences, there exists an opening for dialogue which can challenge the pain underlying the circumstances of that coming together - not perfectly perhaps, but challenge it nonetheless. Here we are in moment and a place which is simultaneously inside and outside of the new empire, simultaneously here and elsewhere. What will we do with this?