I. *Criollismo, Creole, and Créolité*

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**Criollismo**

I would like to use two passages as the point of departure in this review of the meanings of *criollo* and *criollismo* in Latin American studies, particularly when referring to the Spanish-speaking areas:¹

Los hombres y mugeres que cria este nuevo Mundo, por mas proporcionados a la participacion de los beneuolos influjos de sus astros gozan de excellentes calidades, y de todos aquellos dones con que la naturaleza iluistra a sus muy favorecidos, los cuerpos de las mugeres tienen mucha alma, las almas de los hombres mucho entendimiento, y todos en comun, buenos talles, hermosas caras, afables condiciones, y liberales animos. Aun donde la agudeza es muy natural je gastan ƒeyos y ocho años para estudiar la grammatica, y los criollos del Perú en menos tiempo acaban todos sus estudios, de que se infiere no ser inferiores à otras algunas naciones en la habilidad, y que exceden à muchas en la aplicacion.

(Because they are more adapted to partake in the benevolent influences of their stars, the men and women of this New World enjoy excellent qualities; and as a result of all the gifts with which nature has favored them, women's bodies have plenty of soul, men's souls are filled with understanding, and everyone has nice figures, beautiful faces, kind manners, and generous spirits. Even in those parts of the world where intelligence comes naturally, people spend six or eight years studying grammar; however, since the *criollos* of Peru finish all their studies in less time, it can be inferred that Peruvian criollos are not inferior to other nations in their abilities, and that they surpass many others in their diligence. [Francisco Antonio de Montalvo, *El Sol del Nuevo Mundo* (1680), f. 16r; my translation, here and in all quotations])

Nosotros somos un pequeño género humano; poseemos un mundo aparte, cercado por dilatados mares; nuevos en casi todas las artes y ciencias, aunque en cierto modo viejos en los usos de la sociedad civil. […] Nosotros […] no somos indios, ni europeos, sino una especie media entre los legítimos propietarios del país, y los usurpadores españoles; en suma, siendo nosotros
americanos por nacimientos, y nuestros derechos los de Europa, tenemos que disputar estos a los del país, y que mantenernos en él contra la invasión de los invasores; así nos hallamos en el caso más extraordinario y complicado. (Bolívar, “Carta de Jamaica,” 1815, 169)

(We are a young people. We inhabit a world apart, separated by broad seas. We are young in the ways of almost all the arts and sciences, although, in a certain manner, we are old in the ways of civilized society. […] We […] are, moreover, neither Indian nor European, but a species midway between the legitimate proprietors of this country and the Spanish usurpers. In short, though Americans by birth we derive our rights from Europe, and we have to assert these rights against the rights of the natives, and at the same time we must defend ourselves against the invaders. This places us [Creoles] in a most extraordinary and complicated situation.)

These two passages summarize the evolution in the definition of the notion “criollo” from the seventeenth century until the wars of independence in Latin America in the nineteenth century. As we will see, throughout sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, criollo evolved from a colonial term to refer to Africans and Europeans born and raised in the Americas, to the quintessential term to refer to the new identities used to justify the state formation and cultural independence in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean. This chapter traces the origins and evolution of this notion.

The term “criollismo” derives from “criollo,” a Hispanization of the Portuguese crioulo, which originally referred to the offspring of Africans born outside of Africa. In time, within the Spanish possessions in the Americas, “criollo” referred to the “white” descendants of Spaniards born in the New World. “Criollos” considered themselves to be culturally Europeans, but emotionally their allegiance was to the land or patria where they were born. In many cases, they claimed to have a better knowledge of the indigenous and African-descent population of the viceroyalties than the Spaniards who spent little time in the New World holding high administrative positions and an advantageous economic situation. “Criollismo,” thus, is the political and identity expression of that ambiguous condition. It has been defined as one of the main components of modern nationalisms in Spanish America, although its emphasis in the European traces of its cultural background has many times led to the renewed marginalization of Amerindian and African-descent populations; therefore the problematic foundation and development of nation-states in countries with important indigenous and African-descent population until today. The English translation, “creole” (taken from the French créole), also conveys the same meaning when referred to the Spanish-speaking context, but it has a different meaning when used in the non-Spanish Caribbean countries (as I will discuss later). Sometimes, it is still used in English-speaking historiography to refer to the African-descent population in the continental Spanish possessions (see Bennett 2003). In some Spanish-speaking areas, criollo, however, still preserves its original meaning—related to children of Africans born in