

THE FRENCH CREOLES OF TRINIDAD AND THE LIMITS OF THE FRANCOPHONE

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Abstract

This article is framed by the argument that, for all its justified condemnation of the closed nature of traditional French studies, the realm of Francophone studies constructs its own barriers and its own conventions of what constitutes Francophone writing. The influence of postcolonial theory on the field, it is argued, has focused interest almost exclusively on the literature of the colonized and the repressed in neocolonial and postcolonial situations. The influence of conventional French studies has, moreover, led most Francophone scholars to work on areas where France and French language retain an important presence. While not denying the necessity of this dual focus, the article proposes that attention be paid to areas where French colonial presence was interrupted or subsumed by that of another colonial power. The body of the article considers the history and cultural legacy of the French Creoles of Trinidad as an example of a Francophone group that wielded considerable influence in the nineteenth century, but which has now all but disappeared. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the study of such forgotten pockets of Francophone literature is one way of ensuring a creative discordance within the realm of Francophone studies.

Emerging, as it did, from two discrete disciplines — French studies and postcolonialism — it was almost inevitable that Francophone postcolonial studies should adopt many of the fundamental critical perspectives of its two precursors. Quite naturally, Francophone scholars, working in the main in French departments, have tended to focus primarily on extra-hexagonal regions where France, French culture and French language retain an important presence, notably West Africa, the Maghreb, Réunion, and in the Caribbean, Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Haiti. Equally, and almost as a matter of course, the influence of postcolonialism has directed most critical attention towards the situation of the repressed and marginalized living in colonial or postcolonial territories, and to intellectuals writing back against colonialism and racism. Because the greater part of this anti-colonial writing emerged in the mid-twentieth century, Francophone studies is also very much rooted in the modern and contemporary period. While the recent flurry of critical inquiry into the relationship between France, extra-hexagonal Francophone spaces, French language texts and postcolonialism has laudably stressed the importance of extending permanently the boundaries of traditional French studies, the focus in Francophone postcolonial studies on sites of enduring French influence, on anti-colonialism and on the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries has with a few notable exceptions gone unquestioned, and been accepted as the *modus operandi* for most Francophone scholars.¹

However, much those of us working in Francophone or Francophone post-colonial studies decry the limits and boundaries of conventional French studies; it seems that to some extent we continue to delineate our own frontiers, to erect our own barriers and to structure our field in ways that seem to be leading, quite unintentionally, to a new critical orthodoxy. As self-appointed pioneers of this new domain, we decide which are the correct and most worthy authors and works, even as in the field itself the writing continues to invent, and to overflow and make redundant our classifications and categories. We create new canons, based on our own always partial knowledge, and we begin to pass our own imperfect canons and categories on to our students, thereby instituting new structures and new limits. Of course, no one needs to be bound by these limits, but they inevitably influence the general reception of and approach to non-metropolitan writing in French. In this article, I want to test some of these limits, and to ask generally where we place and how we conceptualize those zones where France has had some colonial or cultural influence in the past, but where that influence is now below the surface, and barely or completely imperceptible. Also, I want to ask how (if at all) should Francophone studies incorporate the writings of non-blacks, of privileged elites who, in many cases, were the only groups able to leave written records of their pre-twentieth-century experiences?

There are many territories in the world that were touched by French colonialism, but where French presence was intermittent, superseded by one or more of the other colonial powers, or irregular in some other way. Just such a scenario of partial, marginal or invisible French presence arises in the case of India, whose place in Francophone studies is being questioned and debated.² In the Caribbean, where the possession of most islands was transferred many times between the various colonial powers, French influence has been deposited not only in the *départements français d'Amérique* and Haiti, but also in many other islands, and most significantly perhaps in St Lucia, Grenada, Dominica and Tobago. Each of these islands was at one time controlled by the French, and retains by way of place names and family names traces of that presence. In St Lucia and Dominica, there survives a French-lexicon Creole that serves as a very visible, or rather audible aide-mémoire of the historical presence of France.

¹See, for example, Charles Forsdick, 'Between "French" and "Francophone": French Studies and the Post-colonial Turn', *French Studies*, 59:4 (2005), 523–30; *Francophone Texts and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. by Celia Britton and Michael Syrotinski (= *Paragraph*, 24:3 (2001)); *French and Francophone: The Challenge of Expanding Horizons*, ed. by Farid Laroussi and Christopher L. Miller (= *Yale French Studies*, 103 (2003)); and the first three issues of *Francophone Postcolonial Studies* (2003–04).

²See, for example, *L'Inde et la France: représentations culturelles*, ed. by Brian Stimpson and Myriem el Maïzi (= *Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, 3:1 (2005)) and *France-India-Britain: (Post)Colonial Triangles*, ed. by Ian Magedera (= *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 5:2 (2002)).

In the cases of Haiti, Martinique and Guadeloupe (the more recognizably Francophone Caribbean zones), scholars are in fact beginning to look beyond the temporal, thematic and critical confines that have characterized much of Francophone studies to date. Doris L. Garraway's work has, for example, opened up the study of what she calls the 'cultures of slavery of Old Regime France', and has sought to end the silence in postcolonial studies that has surrounded these cultures.³ Significantly, too, Garraway addresses the 'considerable disregard' in Francophone Caribbean studies for early colonial narratives and cultural history. Garraway is moreover perceptive in her argument that these narratives have been neglected by postcolonialism because 'few of the categories and concepts current in postcolonial studies are useful in a discussion of the Old Regime cultures of slavery in which the "other" was not native and there was so little ambivalence involved in the process of commodifying the human individual'.⁴ She is equally incisive in explaining the absence of discussions of non-black colonial authors in the Francophone literary field:

For a literary scholar, it is immediately far more gratifying to read the novels of slavery and colonialism written by postcolonial writers committed to reimagining the subversiveness, resistance, and intelligence of captive peoples than to confront the missionary relations, colonial histories, legal codes, travel literature, novels, and political treatises that represent the same people in different terms.⁵

More generally, too, as is shown in the current work of Nick Nesbitt, Chris Bongie, Deborah Jenson and others, there is a new interest in pre-twentieth-century material, and in expanding the fields of postcolonialism and francophone studies.⁶ Together, these authors are extending the temporal scope of francophone Caribbean studies, helping construct a more complex understanding of the francophone Caribbean, and increasing awareness of the pre-history of twentieth-century movements such as Haitian indigenism, Negritude and Creolity.⁷

This article complements Garraway's work in particular in that its focus is largely on an elite francophone Caribbean colonial group, its cultural influence and literary production. However, it differs in that it does not deal with a conventionally francophone island, but with another whose history of French influence is irregular and not widely known: Trinidad. This island was

³D. L. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2005), p. xi.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁶See for example these authors' articles in Deborah Jenson's guest-edited issue of *Yale French Studies*, 107 (2005) on Haiti and nineteenth-century French studies. See also Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2008) and Chris Bongie, *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2008).

⁷In the case of Haiti, J. Michael Dash has also done significant work on pre-twentieth-century material. See, for example, Chapter 2 of his *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 1998).

under Spanish control for 300 years, until the end of the eighteenth century when first a massive influx of French planters, both white and free coloureds, and their slaves, and then the cession of the island to the British created a quite particular colonial situation where the political administration was British but the dominant culture and language were French and French Creole. Trinidad in the late eighteenth century and for much of the nineteenth century was a curious Francophone space, and in the remainder of this article I will consider certain aspects of the French presence in Trinidad, focusing on the elite group that became known as the French Creoles, its history, its culture and its relationship to the British administration, before finally drawing conclusions on what (if any) place there should be for this group and others like it in Francophone studies.

Spanish waste and French gain

For 300 years the prevalent culture in post-Columbian Trinidad was Spanish, even if the island was not permanently settled until 1592, when Antonio de Berrio founded the town of San José de Oruña, modern day St Joseph and Trinidad's first capital. Concerned primarily with finding gold and silver, of which Trinidad had none, the Spaniards long used Trinidad as a staging post for expeditions into the South American mainland, in search of El Dorado. This neglect of the island — one element of what V.S. Naipaul calls the 'Spanish waste' — meant that a large-scale plantation economy developed relatively late in Trinidad.⁸ It was not until the 1770s that the Spanish began to develop Trinidad, when two cedulas of population were issued, inviting non-Spaniard Roman Catholics to settle in Trinidad and set up plantations, in what Eric Williams describes as a 'confession of the total failure of Spanish colonialism'.⁹ The first new arrivals in Trinidad were coloured and white French-speaking planters, enticed from the French islands and British Grenada by the promise of new lands and fresh opportunities. French immigration was given a new impetus after 1789, as planters and free coloureds of varying political persuasions fled the repercussions of the Revolution in other islands. At the time of the British conquest of Trinidad in 1797, the majority of the island's free population was of French origin and French- and French Creole-speaking. Trinidad's free-coloured group at the turn of the eighteenth century was unusually large: in 1802, it numbered 5,275 compared with 2,261 whites. In the words of the historian L. M. Fraser, the French Creole group had its origins in 'families belonging to the old *noblesse*', those who had left the French colonies in the hope of recuperating 'fortunes squandered in the salons of Paris and Versailles', and it was they who 'formed the nucleus of that refined society for which the island has always been celebrated'.¹⁰ As the French Creole group established itself in

⁸V. S. Naipaul, *The Loss of El Dorado* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982 [1969]), p. 20.

⁹E. Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (Port of Spain, PNM, 1962), p. 20.

¹⁰L. M. Fraser, *History of Trinidad*, 2 vols (Port of Spain, [n. pub.], 1891–92), i, 11.

Trinidad, it also came to include non-Francophone island-born whites of Irish, Spanish, Corsican, German and English descent. Almost without exception the members of the group were Roman Catholic, property-owning, and pure white, with no black ancestry. Fraser is one example of an English Catholic who married a woman of Corsican descent and thereby gained entry to the French Creole group; another example is Sylvester Devenish, born in Ireland, but whose children were all born in Trinidad and married into French Creole families. Membership of the group was therefore possible through birth, marriage or ascription.¹¹ If it was, to some extent, possible for non-Francophones to be elected into the group, at its core it remained staunchly French and aristocratic. Another French Creole historian, P. G. L. Borde, wrote in 1881 that most of the late-eighteenth-century French immigrants were *nobles* or *gentilshommes*: whites in general, he wrote, 'étaient nobles, car on sait que ce furent des gentilshommes qui peuplèrent en grande partie les établissements des Français en Amérique'.¹² At the same time, however, many other families without noble origins affected elevated manners, altering their names to include the aristocratic *de* and remaining loyal to the House of Bourbon. Borde, like other descendants of the original French Creoles of Trinidad, was proud of his ancestors' role in cultivating and settling the island. The greater part of the second volume of his history of Trinidad is devoted to a detailed account of the way the French developed and colonized the country between 1783 and 1797. In this sense, and in the veneration in which *les enfants du pays* held their ancestors, later generations of French Creoles created and nurtured a kind of frontier myth, according to which the original planters were the grand pioneers who tamed the wild forests and swamps of Trinidad. Such an idea was expressed by the editor of the *Trinidad Chronicle* on the death of Toussaint Rostant, a French Creole born in Trinidad in 1794, and who was credited with developing the central district of Couva. 'French blood and English energy', the editor wrote, 'created that mixture of kindheartedness and stern resolve, which distinguished most of the old planters who opened up our virgin forests and pushed civilisation into the heart of the island'.¹³ Significantly in this regard, one of the professions dominated by French Creoles was surveying, which for many members of the group was a natural progression from, or a continuation of their ancestors' pioneering movements into the hinterland. Through surveying and map-making, the French Creoles could demarcate, name and thereby take further possession of the land. Surveying was in this sense a means of consummating the relationship the forefathers had instigated with the virgin land. Long before the contemporary trend in postcolonial, post-structuralist thought to decolonize the map, to conceive of space as shifting

¹¹Bridget Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad, 1870–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 35.

¹²P. G. L. Borde, *Histoire de la Trinidad sous le gouvernement espagnol*, 2 vols (Paris, Maisonneuve et Compagnie, 1876–82), ii, 188.

¹³*Trinidad Chronicle*, 22 June 1871.

ground, and to highlight the contingent nature of maps, the French Creoles of Trinidad were keenly aware of the power that cartography conferred on the cartographer. The drawing of maps and plans was for these colonizers a way of fixing, closing and laying claim to space — the antithesis to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's view of the map as 'ouverte [...] démontable, renversible, susceptible de recevoir constamment des modifications', as an open text that can 's'adapter à des montages de toute nature, être mise en chantier par un individu, un groupe, une formation sociale'.¹⁴

The colonizing, naming, framing, efforts of the surveyors were complemented by the celebrated work of the nineteenth-century painter Jean-Michel Cazabon, a Martinican-born mulatto educated in England, France and Italy. Cazabon's landscape painting, in particular, harmonized 'the spatial and social aspects of the land', represented inhabitants accommodating themselves to the new French-Creole-controlled social order, and also 'brought the local landscape into the realm of social consciousness'.¹⁵ At the same time, French Creoles were publishing seminal works on Trinidadian geography and ornithology, which were further means of analysing, explaining, categorizing, and thereby taming nature and the land.¹⁶

These developments in the fields of surveying, map-making, landscape painting, geography and ornithology were, in turn, reflected in the writings of amateur poets among the French Creole group. Indeed, one of the French Creoles' least-known but most historically valuable contributions to nineteenth-century Trinidadian culture was the poetry produced by literary-minded members of the group, usually composed on the occasion of a political or social scandal, or else for events like birthdays or holidays. This poetry has been largely ignored or forgotten in analyses of Trinidadian culture — no doubt due to the fact that it was written in French and that it was not always of high aesthetic value — and yet it offers unique, first-hand insights into the French Creole lifestyle and general ethos, and also into the evolution of Trinidadian society in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Poetry was written by French Creoles in both French and patois. It has been transmitted in four different forms: in manuscript copies passed informally between elite families and across different generations; in printed leaflets that were available for public sale; in (now defunct) newspapers such as the *Echo*, the *Palladium* and the *Star of the West*; and finally in private albums and various published books, typically biographies or memoirs, that

¹⁴G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris, Minuit, 1980), p. 20. See also Graham Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism, and the Cartographic Connection', *Ariel*, 20:4 (1989), 115–31.

¹⁵Selwyn R. Cudjoe, *Beyond Boundaries: The Intellectual Tradition of Trinidad and Tobago in the Nineteenth Century* (Wellesley, MA, Calaloux, 2003), p. 148. See also Geoffrey Maclean, *Cazabon: An Illustrated Biography of Trinidad's Nineteenth Century Painter* (Port of Spain, Aquarela Galleries, 1986).

¹⁶See L. A. A. de Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography, Natural Resources, Administration, Present Condition and Prospects* (London, Ward and Lock, 1858) and Antoine Léotaud, *Oiseaux de l'Île de la Trinidad* (Port of Spain, Chronicle, 1866).

¹⁷In many respects, this poetry, which perhaps lacks the discursive complexity of later Francophone Caribbean writing, is similar to the *doudouisme* of nineteenth-century Haitian literature, though there were important differences of colour and race between contemporary Haitian and Trinidadian literary elites.

include a few of the subject's own poems.¹⁸ Even if a broad selection of this poetry was published by the historian Anthony de Verteuil in the late 1970s, it has received little critical attention to date.¹⁹ Although it is a fairly obscure, largely forgotten corpus, it had as de Verteuil says a 'formative influence' on contemporary elite attitudes, largely because poetry was 'very much more in the public ear than is verse at the present'.²⁰ The French Creoles' poetry should, however, be read as just one facet of Trinidad's contemporary polyphonic discourse, which consisted of works such as the anonymously written *Adolphus: A Tale*, which was serialized in the *Trinidadian* newspaper in 1853, and which perpetuated a long tradition of writing on the marginalized status of free coloureds in the island.²¹ In addition, the poetry existed alongside the vernacular traditions of popular song and dance, and carnival, and the writings of an emerging black lower middle class, most notably those of John Jacob Thomas, who legitimized the popular language and folk culture in *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar* (1869), and asserted black Trinidadian identity in *Froudacity* (1889), his rebuke to James Anthony Froude's *The English in the West Indies*. There were therefore many different, competing discourses on nation, place and culture in nineteenth-century Trinidad, and the French verse, largely in accordance with the French-Creole-led developments in surveying, landscape painting and geography, expressed its own vision of a hierarchical society, and a land that could be further demarcated and appropriated.

In particular, many of the nineteenth-century French Creole poets composed works that celebrated their connection with the island, and particularly the hinterland. For instance, the poem 'Solitude' (1855), by Charles Le Cadre, the manager of a sugar plantation at Cedros, Trinidad, and descendant of a ship-owning family of Nantes, describes his desire to flee the 'bruit du monde' and to live in an 'obscur vallée' in a 'simple chambre isolée'. There is a certain primitivism in the speaker's wish to return to a simple life, and also a strong suggestion of his easy, natural relationship with the land:

Une cabane
Sous quelque bel arbre ombrageux
Et puis un ruisseau mélodieux
Dans ma savanne.

Là sans argent
Je dormirais toujours tranquille
Ignoré du reste de l'île
Pauvre et content.²²

¹⁸For example, there are poetry sections in Anthony de Verteuil's study *Sylvester Devenish and the Irish in Nineteenth Century Trinidad* (Port of Spain, Paria, 1986).

¹⁹A. de Verteuil, *Trinidad's French Verse 1850–1900* (Port of Spain, Instant Print, 1978). Cudjoe discusses Trinidad's French verse in his *Beyond Boundaries*, pp. 306–18.

²⁰De Verteuil, *Trinidad's French Verse*, p. 4.

²¹See Cudjoe, *Beyond Boundaries*, pp. 121–23.

²²In de Verteuil, *Trinidad's French Verse*, p. 34.

A more specific rural site is celebrated in the poem 'Impressions de la cascade de Maracas' (1895), written by Eugène Lange, a cocoa estate manager in the Santa Cruz Valley in Trinidad's Northern Range. In this poem, the speaker's visual and aural observations of the 'filet argenté[... qui coule] murmurant, de doux chants des péans', lead ultimately to the expression of his mystical, spiritual connection to the waterfall, and a final vow to return:

Nous reviendrions un jour rechercher le mystère
 Qui voile ta naissance, O filet argenté
 Et souhaiter tous deux, que notre amour sur terre
 Ne finisse qu'avec ton murmure enchanté.²³

The wish that the speaker's life end within earshot of the 'murmure enchanté' of the waterfall is more than a quasi-romantic whim; in the context of nineteenth-century Trinidad, it expresses the French Creoles' generally held connection to the island as a place not for temporary speculation, but as a homeland in which they could quite contentedly experience the natural cycle of birth, life and death. If the better-known (twentieth-century) branches of French Caribbean literature have long meditated over the difficulties of truly taking root in the islands, the nineteenth-century poetry of Trinidad's French Creoles is remarkable for its stated strong attachment to the land. As such, this obscure, forgotten writing is less problematically grounded than virtually all other traditions of Caribbean writing. Having come to the islands by choice, it was of course easier for the French Creoles to form these bonds than it has been for the slaves and their descendants. This poetry can therefore be related to the group's surveying and map-making, as these activities seek to bring form, shape and signification to that which was previously unknown and without fixed meanings and contours. Fittingly perhaps, this relationship between writing and surveying in nineteenth-century Trinidad indicates in some senses a prescient example of Deleuze and Guattari's belief that, 'Écrire n'a rien à voir avec signifier, mais avec arpenter, cartographier, même des contrées à venir'.²⁴

Internal and external worlds

The influx of new French planters — white and coloured — and their slaves transformed not only Trinidad's society and economy, but also its culture, most notably and enduringly in the celebration of carnival. During the nineteenth century, the two dominant white groups — the British (including English Creoles) and the French Creoles — were often in conflict over social and cultural issues. Tensions were created by religious and cultural

²³In de Verteuil, *Trinidad's French Verse*, p. 106.

²⁴Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, p. 11. Perhaps the most obvious later point of comparison for this poetry would be the work of Saint-John Perse, in that Perse's work offers similar evocative white celebrations of the Caribbean natural landscape and also places great importance on patrimony. Perse's sense of belonging, however, was typically caught between his Guadeloupean place of birth and France, between the New and Old Worlds, and as such was never as truly grounded as that of Trinidad's French Creoles. See Mary Gallagher, *La Créolité de Saint-John Perse* (Paris, Gallimard, 1998), pp. 74–122.

differences between the two: the British generally espoused middle-class, Victorian values including the primary worth of industry and thrift, the belief in science and progress, the subordinate position of women, and most importantly, the idea that Britain was the foremost example of a modern, enlightened and civilized nation. While the French Creoles certainly shared the British belief in white, European superiority, their outlook was once again more aristocratic, and many planters harked back to the France of the *Ancien Régime*, taking pride in their ancestors' loyalty to the royalist cause, and their own claims to high birth and noble ancestry.²⁵ Further differences between the two groups are suggested by Andrew Pearse, who argues that the French 'sought and found recognition amongst their peers by excelling in elegance, sophistication and ability in the arts, conversation, dress, music and hospitality, according to provincial French standards', while the English planter regarded the West Indian colonies as 'places to be tolerated for the sake of a quick fortune, the fruits of which might be enjoyed in the metropolitan country'.²⁶ These differences shaped the two groups' approaches to culture: in general terms, the French Creoles reinvigorated the Shrovetide festivities that their fellow Catholic Spanish predecessors had introduced to Trinidad, and instigated the long carnival season of *fêtes* and celebration that still runs from Twelfth Night to Shrove Tuesday, while the Protestant British, more utilitarian in instinct, tended not to indulge in celebratory excesses, and attempted to control and limit carnival celebrations. Thus, if there was an ontological division between uncivilized black culture and civilized white culture in colonial Trinidad, it was most systematically — though not exclusively — evoked and perpetuated by the British element in the white group.

Away from the more restrained world of the plantation house, carnival was to many French Creoles an occasion for escape, abandon and libertinage; however, much the festival was viewed with suspicion by the British administration. Official tolerance of carnival in fact fluctuated according to the attitudes of the incumbent governor. In the 1820s, under the governorship of Sir Ralph Woodford, carnival — or at least the elite version of it — had flourished, and had brought together the disparate elements of the white group, creating a new social cohesion among the elite. In contrast, the appointment of Robert William Keate as governor in 1857 marked a period of increasing control of, and consequently tension in, carnival. Keate was soon under the influence of the mainly British anti-carnival elements in white Trinidadian society, and in 1858 a proclamation was issued forbidding the wearing of masks at Shrovetide. Keate's attempts to control masking opened up once again divisions between the French Creoles and the English; the *Sentinel* published an editorial in February 1858 condemning the 'absurdity' of Keate's apparent desire to 'make this Colony English in its manners, habits

²⁵Brereton, *Race Relations*, p. 5.

²⁶Pearse, 'Carnival in Nineteenth-Century Trinidad', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 4:2 and 4:3 (1956), 175–93 (p. 177).

and customs'.²⁷ The unforeseen — by Keate — yet predictable consequence of the governor's actions was, as the editorial says, 'that new life and vigour was given to the almost defunct carnival and in 1859 preparations were made to carrying it out on a more extended scale than had been the case for years'.²⁸ This episode demonstrates, in contrast to the colonial authorities' suspicion of and disdain for the festival, the strong identification with and protective instincts towards carnival felt by indigenous Trinidadians, and especially those of French Creole origins.

In truth, however, the influence and prosperity of the French Creoles were by this time waning, and Keate's attempts to anglicize Trinidad were but one more step in the gradual marginalization of the French group. De Verteuil estimates that by 1850 the educated French-speaking population numbered considerably fewer than 2,000 adults out of a total population of 69,000, and by 1900 a similar number out of 344,000 people.²⁹ The price of cocoa had fallen dramatically in the 1820s, and the value of sugar in the 1860s had similarly crashed, and Trinidad's sugar-cane planters struggled to compete with sugar grown in slave colonies and with the recent development of sugar beet in Europe. A revealing, if again little-known poem of the period, 'La Canne à sucre: chant du planteur trinitadien', vaunts the attributes of island-grown sugar cane, and reveals much about the French Creole planters' contemporary self-perception.³⁰ Written by Devenish, a French Creole government surveyor born in Nantes of an Irish Catholic family that first came to Trinidad in the late eighteenth century, the poem can also be read as a kind of lament for a lifestyle and an ethic that was quickly being subsumed by the growing anglicization of Trinidad. The first stanza establishes the mixed celebratory and elegiac tone, and also introduces the theme of opposition to Europe and the Old World:

Dans notre île au ciel sans pareil,
Où tout se dore au beau soleil;
Où la nature est si féconde,
Ce que j'admire avec amour
A chaque minute du jour,
C'est ce Roseau que l'ancien monde
Nous envira toujours à nous:
La CANNE A SUCRE au jus si doux!

This poem stresses that in contrast to the English, whose primary loyalties tended to be towards England and the Crown, the French Creoles felt a very strong attachment to the islands, and to their physical environment. Trinidad, to the French Creoles, was 'notre île', their primary place of belonging, and they in many ways distinguished themselves from the *ancien*

²⁷ Quoted in John Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 55.

²⁸ Quoted in Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso*, p. 55.

²⁹ De Verteuil, *Trinidad's French Verse*, p. 11.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 54–57.

monde of Europe. The mocking of Europe continues in the second stanza, in which the speaker decries the attempts of 'la vieille Europe jalouse' to 'détrôner' king sugar, and derides its vain attempts to find new sources of sugar such as sugar beet, imphee, and less plausibly, maple.

It is of course unlikely that those directly engaged in the arduous tasks of planting and harvesting sugar cane would have held the crop in such esteem. Indeed, it is remarkable in this poem, as in other French Creole poetry, that the black and Indian field workers are never mentioned; it is as if they did not exist or as if they were happily part of the felicitous French Creole plantation system. As such, French Creole poetry is largely the univocal expression of one particular perspective; the many other contemporary competing voices were strategically left out. The final stanza indicates a further aspect of contemporary French Creole self-image: their apparent pride in producing sugar without slaves:

Puisse l'Europe, avec mépris,
Repoussant des sucres flétris
Qu'empoisonne encore *L'Esclavage*,
Goûter seul, par humanité,
Le sucre de la *Liberté*! . . .
Et réparant un long outrage,
Payer dans un joyeux accueil,
Double le nôtre, avec orgueil!

The call for Europe to reject sugar poisoned still by slavery — the Netherlands had just abolished slavery in its colonies (1863), and abolition did not come to Puerto Rico until 1873 and Cuba in 1879 — seems to indicate a kind of historical amnesia among the French Creole planters, and a complacent view of themselves as somehow exempt from the moral and ethical taint of slavery. These aspects of French Creole self-image in fact conform to the well-known, though false, conception that slavery in Trinidad was a benign affair, with well-treated slaves and paternalistic masters. This idea is based on an impression that Spanish slave management was more humane than other systems. In reality, however, Spanish slavery legislation was never fully implemented in Trinidad, and it was the markedly less mild French (and Martinican) style that dominated the island's plantations from the 1780s until abolition. Combined with the ever-present fear of a second Haiti, these traditions were far from benign and sanctioned all kinds of torture and mutilation as means of subjugating slaves.³¹ And yet, as the poem shows, French Creoles

³¹Brereton, 'History and Myth in Narratives of Trinidad and Tobago's Past', *UWI Today* (March 2005), (<http://sta.uwi.edu/uwitoday/2005/march/histmyth.asp>) [accessed June 2006]. See the view of the prominent French Creole Borde, in his *Histoire de la Trinidad*: the slaves, he writes, were 'comme des grands enfants qui auraient été confiés à la tutelle de leurs maîtres; et cette comparaison est loin d'être tout à fait imaginaire, car ils faisaient en quelque sorte partie de leurs familles' (ii, 274–75). See also de Verteuil's argument that due to the legacy of 'reasonable treatment from Spanish times' and the relative shortage of slaves in Trinidad, they became 'precious piece[s] of property', whose lives 'differed very much from their unfortunate lot in some of the other colonies', *The Years Before* (Port of Spain, Inprint Caribbean, 1981), p. 5.

seemed to exempt themselves from any historical guilt about slavery, and by the 1860s had already cultivated a celebratory and nostalgic image of their past in Trinidad. It seems that this nostalgia for a French Creole past was heightened by the accelerating anglicization of Trinidad: the more the island lost its Creole ways, the more poignant the nostalgia became, and the more the past could be neatly packaged into a series of myths and misconceptions.

Perhaps the most tangible aspect of this cultural change in the latter part of the nineteenth century was the switch from French language to English as the dominant code. By 1880, French had practically disappeared from Trinidad's newspapers, and elite Port of Spain schools such as St Mary's College and St Joseph's Convent were by then teaching in English.³² Just as the threatened sugar cane was harnessed to French Creole identity, so the imperilled French language — true French and not the corrupted patois of the poor — was promoted as a dying aspect of a refined, aristocratic culture. The poem 'La Langue des cours' written in 1878 by Alphonse Ganteaume, the long-time 'father and confidential adviser of the population of Mayaro', exemplifies the French Creoles' defence of their disappearing idiom, and asserts that the French language is intrinsically linked to the aristocratic tradition in France, and by extension to Trinidad's own French-speaking aristocracy.³³

The anglicization of Trinidad in the late nineteenth century involved however more than a simple linguistic change, a fact that is borne out in Devenish's trenchant poem 'La Cuisse de Jupiter et l'anglomanie à la Trinidad', written in 1880, only two years after Ganteaume's work.³⁴ As Victoria's reign moved steadily towards its Golden Jubilee, and as the British Empire reached its height of influence, it became fashionable among some elements of Trinidad's French Creole elite to adopt English manners, to affect an elevated English accent and even to take up cricket and golf as their games.³⁵ It is this faction, the 'orgueilleux sots', that Devenish mocks; those whose non-English genealogy is well known, but who persist in feigning Englishness in 'notre petit pays | Où chacun si bien se connaît | Trait pour trait'. The speaker appeals to a long-standing French Creole sensibility in his denunciation of the Anglophile parvenus:

Vous savez, comme moi, que leur folle manie
Est de, bon gré, mal gré, vouloir passer, les fous!
Pour être plus anglais, en notre colonie,
Que les anglais pur sang, que vous connaissez tous!

³²Around 1870, the French Creoles, like the English, and if they could afford it, began to send their children to Britain for their education. For example, René de Verteuil was educated at the Catholic public school Stonyhurst, unlike the great family patriarch Louis de Verteuil, who was schooled in France and spoke French as his first language. As Louis's biographer lamented, René did not have 'the grand manner, Parisian culture and wide interests of his father, so that with Louis was to die out in large measure the French aristocratic tradition of the family', Anthony de Verteuil, *Sir Louis de Verteuil, his Life and Times: Trinidad 1800–1900* (Port of Spain, Columbus, 1973), p. 57. See also Brereton, *Race Relations*, p. 47.

³³In de Verteuil, *Trinidad's French Verse*, pp. 80–83.

³⁴De Verteuil, *Trinidad's French Verse*, pp. 84–86.

³⁵Brereton, *Race Relations*, p. 47.

Voyez l'air affecté dont ils sont tous en quête;
 Religion, pays, ils ont renié tout;
 A ravalé les deux, leur bouche est toujours prête,
 Il leur faut, à tout prix, paraître anglais surtout.

Some, the speaker goes on to say, because of their accent and mispronunciations will never master the foreign tongue of the cliquish English, the 'peuple exclusif' that they seek to mimic. Others, he says, go further than mere linguistic mimicry and in their eagerness to appear more English change their very family names:

D'autres, pour se donner un chic plus britannique,
 Se font un point d'honneur d'altérer à plaisir,
 Oubliant leur berceau, leur nom patronymique,
 Comme si de leur père ils avaient à rougir!

As this passage suggests, the shame among certain French Creoles was not only a question of language or name, but most fundamentally of being island-born, of not being native to Europe. In Devenish's view, what distinguished the French Creoles from the English was their long attachment to the islands, and in his final exhortations to Trinidad's anglicizing planter elite the speaker evokes their common creoleness and their bond with the island of Trinidad, aspects of identity that he suggests run deeper than and subsume all other ties:

Vous, créoles, soyez fils de votre patrie,
 Sans vous préoccuper d'où vous descendez tous;
 Laissez à quelques sots leur sottise afféterie
 Et que votre pays puisse être fier de vous!

Soyez creoles de cœur,
 Et toujours avec honneur,
 Sous la bannière du pays
 Tous unis!

Even if their influence had faded by the end of the nineteenth century, the French Creoles of Trinidad therefore occupied a very particular place in the island's society, and through their relatively close relationship with slaves, and notably in carnival and other celebrations, made significant contributions to the cultural creolization of Trinidad. In their attachment to the land and to the New World in general, they were possibly the first incoming group to express a solid sense of belonging to Trinidad; the transported slaves, the indentured Indians and the colonial British for different reasons generally treated the island as a place of exile. The poetry of the French Creoles moreover bears witness to some of the most important changes in nineteenth-century Trinidadian culture and society, and as such constitutes a forgotten branch of what we now call francophone literature. Never intended to be read by anyone outside the French Creole circle, this poetry can be interpreted as an elite group privately addressing, lauding and at times castigating itself.

Just as the group's social prominence receded as the nineteenth century ended, so its literary influence faded. As the twentieth century dawned, and as literacy levels slowly grew, the voices of the rising black classes came to dominate, and across different genres it was the voices of black and Indian authors and intellectuals (C. L. R. James, George Padmore, Eric Williams, V. S. Naipaul and many others) that would dominate public discourse. The most public manifestation of French Creole culture, carnival, had also by this time been largely appropriated by the black lower classes, even if it would remain an object of class and colour conflict during the twentieth century. The term French Creole is still used to designate a distinct social group in Trinidad, but over time the markers of its Frenchness — principally language and aristocratic values — have dissipated and all but disappeared, much like the French-lexicon Creole language that was once the lingua franca of the island, but which is now only spoken by a few older country people, living in remoter parts of the island.

The inclusion of texts and authors into the category of Francophone literature has, to some extent, been based on veneration: black, colonized or otherwise 'repressed' authors writing back against empire, colonialism and neocolonialism have quite rightly been praised and promoted. The point in the case of Trinidad's French Creoles and other forgotten Francophone groups is not to venerate a privileged slave-holding class and its moderately talented poets, but to suggest that Francophone studies should not limit itself to its own canon of authors and texts that say the right things in the right ways. The (literary, historical, anthropological) study of this group and others like it — in Louisiana for example, where French Caribbean émigrés (slaves, free coloureds, and whites) had a profound cultural influence in the early nineteenth century — offers a more nuanced version of colonial societies than the anti-colonial versions that often dominate Francophone and postcolonial studies.³⁶ Comparative work on these zones of diminished or occulted Francophone presence could help further develop our understanding of the prehistory of modern and contemporary Caribbean cultural movements. There are also possible connections to be made between these zones and Francophone Quebec, which has been discussed recently in Deleuzian terms of a destabilized, 'minor Frenchness'.³⁷ The main focus of francophone studies should remain on its great, ever-multiplying pantheon of non-European authors, but its boundaries should remain porous, and allow some consideration of forgotten pockets of white or

³⁶On Francophone migrations to New Orleans, see Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2007), and Keith Cartwright, 'Re-Creolizing Swing: St Domingue Refugees in the Goli of New Orleans', in *Reinterpreting the Haitian Revolution and Its Cultural Aftershocks*, ed. by Martin Munro and Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw (Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, University of the West Indies Press, 2006), pp. 102–22.

³⁷See Bill Marshall, *The French Atlantic: Travels in Culture and History* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2009).

Creole Francophone groups. This will be one way of ensuring that discordance is maintained and bland harmonization kept at bay within Francophone studies, and of gaining a more sophisticated understanding of the internal dynamics of colonial and postcolonial societies.³⁸

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³⁸On the importance of maintaining discordance in Francophone studies, see Forsdick, 'Between "French" and "Francophone"', p. 530.

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