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Kris Sealey
Fairfield University, ksealey@fairfield.edu

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REVIEW ARTICLES

The Creolizing Subject: Race, Racism and the Politics of Purity. Michael Monahan. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.

KRIS SEALEY AND
AXELLE KARERA

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DIRTY CONSCIENCES AND RUNAWAY SELVES: A LEVINASIAN RESPONSE TO MONAHAN

Kris Sealey, Fairfield University

There have been many attempts to legitimize the employment of a racialized identity *alongside* the delegitimization of racist practices, social mores, and institutions. Mike Monahan's *The Creolizing Subject* reads as one of the most noteworthy of such attempts because of his account of what he names "the politics of purity." Monahan relies on the notion of a politics of purity to make the case that we do not (and indeed, *should* not) advocate the absence of race in the name of antiracism. Within the parameters of purity (which, as I read it, is sufficiently pervasive so as to encompass the political, metaphysical, and all else in between), a clarity of boundaries that rigidly demarcate categories of sameness and difference are valued at the expense of blurriness, ambiguity, and plasticity. To be sure, the political purist understands ambiguity not in terms of a productive and truth-bearing nuance, but rather as an obstacle in her striving for systems of knowledge. This is insofar as those systems are reified and nonchanging intelligibilities toward which a rational mind moves. As such, the epistemic reference

points in a politics of purity are "being" and "non-being." The implication of this, Monahan notes, is that those dynamic *processes of becoming/shifting* that litter our human condition are lost to the degree that they appear solely in terms of either *being* what they will be, or *no longer being* what they were.

Monahan's analysis seeks to replace this valorization of purity with a more nuanced appreciation for fluidity, indeterminacy and open-endedness. He names the idea of the subject that would support this shift a creolizing subjectivity. This review identifies significant resonance between this account and what one reads in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Though the pages of *The Creolizing Subject* make no reference to this work, it is easy to recognize that Monahan's creolizing subjectivity is much like the Levinasian conception of identity insofar as they both call into question the assumptions of closure and wholeness. Both accounts understand the boundaries of the self as very much open onto that which is Other, and read, in that openness, significant ethical and political implications. To be clear, Monahan's creolizing subjectivity is specifically targeted to perform the work of racial justice in ways that are simply absent in Levinas. But this would seem to position Monahan's analysis as one that might open up a new avenue for Levinasian scholarship, namely, one that addresses questions of race and racialized identities. This can be but one of the many ways in which Monahan's account of a creolizing subject adds value to the philosophical canon.

The Creolizing Subject engages the ontologies of race that are employed in the abolitionist and eliminativist positions, and shows that both ultimately rely on a politics of racial purity. Monahan's advocacy of the creolizing subject is a critique of these positions. To put this differently, his analysis works to replace the conception of "the human" around which a politics of purity is centered, and which subsequently makes certain binary and rigid forms of racialization feasible. In its place, *The Creolizing Subject* sketches another possibility, a conception of selfhood that rests squarely on de-centering and fragmentation. Though the stakes of Monahan's project are not, in any way, Levinasian, the reformulation included in his notion of "creolizing" is quite reminiscent of a Levinasian conception of the self as "without identity" torn asunder under its indebtedness to the Other.

The purist's conception of identity has it that what is internal to the subject is capable of being clearly separated from what is external to the subject. There is an inner coherence or wholeness to the human *subject*, who is pitted over and against the external world (the *object* of her contemplation, knowledge and action). There is what is "purely" myself

and then there is what is "purely" other. Monahan points out that this is the understanding around which the politics of liberalism organizes itself, insofar as this pure human subject possesses triumphant reign over the purely nonhuman object. But throughout this mastery of self and other, the line that separates the two remains fundamentally static. Indeed, the success with which this liberal subject masters herself relies on a clear and unambiguous boundary between "self" and "other." Across this boundary, both terms come into contact but never mix, and according to a politics of purity, never inform each other. In this sense, humanity isn't humanity unless it is pure, and it is only the *pure* subject (in control of some border that guards against the invasion of the inner life by radical exteriorities) who gets to partake in that liberal, enlightenment ideal of self-governance. As Monahan writes, the logic of purity is a logic of "either A or B," "all A or not A at all," and so it categorizes being in binary and exclusive terms. The notion of human identity that comes out of this is also ultimately binary and exclusionary, and works with a fabricated notion of freedom that is static and reified when it comes to understanding the spaces that inform notions of "self" and "other."

One of the tasks Monahan sets himself is to illuminate an antiracist praxis that acknowledges the positivity of a racialized subject, or at the very least, "rejects the *conflation* of race and racism," all the while recognizing the interrelatedness of the two (206, emphasis added). The agent of this antiracist praxis is the creolizing subject, whose identity represents a corrective to the presumption of stasis, and is founded instead on "becoming and process." Monahan argues persuasively, that under this reformulation, the central importance of openness in the process of identity creation allows for antiracism itself to be understood as an "ongoing practice" instead of as an end to be pursued and realized. In this vein, the meaning and *telos* of race is understood as a shifting, ever-changing locus of ambiguity.

The term *creolization* first appears in Monahan's analysis in chapter 3 (83), and comes after his sketch of the abolitionist and eliminativist positions on race. Both positions generate an account of antiracism that Monahan determines to be insufficiently radical that retains, in principle, the politics of racial purity. For the abolitionist, whiteness is a discrete, completely formed unit that can only signify as exploitation and white supremacy. For the eliminativist, the *telos* of racial formulations come out of this insidious history of exploitation and so racialized embodiment is always detrimental. Furthermore, the eliminativist recognizes these formations

to be arbitrarily formed and ambiguously implemented in the first place, which, accordingly, signals that "race" is a nonreality that should be eliminated from our semantic and metaphysical spaces. Hence, both the abolitionist and the eliminativist begin with an understanding of race in terms of discrete and rigid "all or nothing" realities (sometimes faux-realities) that are never open to transformation, and so a dismantling of racism entails a dismantling of the very notion of race altogether. By contrast, Monahan articulates a creolizing subject in terms of the "way in which [she] confronts and engages [with the ambiguity and plasticity of racial becoming]" (188). This creolizing *way* is preceded by a "psychic restlessness" that embraces the impossibility of closure when it comes to the signification of race, a "tolerance for ambiguity" and a 'massive uprooting' of the kind of dualistic thinking that reduces the meaning of race to the meaning of racism.

Monahan argues that this comportment does not presuppose an actual mixed-race heritage, or even a mixed-race experience, since anyone willing to engage in a sufficiently radical antiracist praxis can dismantle the politics of purity. Nevertheless, it behooves the critical philosophy of race to ask whether the concrete *living* of the inadequacy of the logic of purity predisposes one to take up this difficult task of antiracist contestation. The creolizing antiracist would have to make visible what is quite invisible (given its pervasiveness), namely, the very structures and framework of a thought encoded with the politics of purity. So while my concretely living the *fraying* of these structures (as what excludes me to the degree that I actually *live* incoherence, ambiguity and collusion) does not strictly condition the possibility of my embarking upon this creolizing way of engaging with the world, one might suspect that it stacks the odds in my favor. To be sure, my marginalization under a politics of purity might not act as a transcendental structure (in some Kantian sense), but this is not to deny a clear predisposition toward taking up the creolizing way of being, a predisposition that is "awarded" to me by virtue of my historical and material facticities. To this end, we should also ask whether or not, in the process of creolization, the stakes involved for those already marginalized by the politics of purity is at all comparable to the stakes of those for whom this politics is designed to benefit. In other words, what would it mean, and what would it require for a nonwhite body to engage in creolization, and how would this fare in comparison to a white embodiment of creolization? Might a creolizing subjectivity be a relative luxury for an embodiment of whiteness in a way that it just can't be for those racialized as "nonwhite"? These questions should

guide any attempt to come to terms with what Monahan presents as the ontological fluidity of the notion of racial becoming.

In any event, the politics of purity precludes a proper engagement with such fluidity. Outside of this logic's fascination with closure, Monahan argues that "identity" does not reference what I *am*, precisely because "I" am never a coherent unit consisting of "me" and my "self." Hence, there is always, on the interior, or as part of the inner life of identity, that which is other/or not yet "me," and which forces me to reconstitute what I am becoming in this "infinite task" of selfhood. It is tempting to hear in this account certain echoes of a Sartrean conception f human consciousness. For Sartre, I am free insofar as I am never frozen in a temporal present, but rather am always ahead of myself, projecting a future "I" that is freely and spontaneously created. This means that I am not committed to *being* any one thing. One might want to read this in the ways in which Monahan's creolizing subject is in the continuous project of contesting and renegotiating who she is in general, and the meaning of her race in particular.

However, in heeding to Monahan's own critique of rigid distinctions between identity and difference, it becomes clear that his notion of the creolizing subject is, in important ways, very *different* from this Sartrean formulation. Indeed, Monahan's account would be more productively placed in dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas's conception of identity as a diachronic relation between the subject (the "I") and her "self," although Monahan nowhere mentions him. This diachrony is meant to contrast the kind of *syn*chrony that is emblematic of the subject who "is who she is", coherently, through and through. In place of this liberal construction, Levinas determines the subject to be such that she never coincides with herself, making for a kind of identity that is very much a "duality within a unity." Monahan's formulation of a creolizing identity resonates with this Levinasian account, particularly in its calling into question the distinction between the "external" and "internal" that registers with the logic of purity.

The structures included in the process of creolization straddle the moments of dialogue between Sartre and Levinas to generate a fruitful conversation about race in ways that neither of these thinkers explicitly develops. Monahan's emphasis on the position of the subject as an active contestation of race recalls the Sartrean notion of a future-oriented spontaneity, and so establishes the creolizing subject as very much in charge of how race gets signified. But in the very same moment of contestation and transformation, this subject confronts "the call to be responsible to and for

racism as the ongoing practice of purity" (199). As such, the creolizing way is much like the Levinasian way, insofar as it entails a coming to terms with aspects of oneself that remain beyond (or behind) the parameters of the *activity* of contestation. In other words, Monahan's inclusion of the need to take responsibility for a racism that persists despite and in spite of one's antiracist practices comes close to that region of persistent vulnerability in the self, of which Levinas remains mindful throughout his work.

A responsibility *to* racism would entail discovering and addressing its practice, both in oneself and in others, while a responsibility *for* racism would mean acknowledging one's own complicity in the institutionalization of the practice, despite one's noblest intentions to the contrary. All antiracist praxis will inevitably be a positioned (or situated) praxis, which is to say that, in my endeavor, I find myself to be already constituted by the same sociopolitical codes of racial purity that I seek to dismantle (because, indeed, I am always free to reconstitute the ways in which I have been already constituted). Hence, the creolizing subject cannot expect to be without racist prejudices, beliefs or pre-reflective states of mind. To be clear, Monahan's critique points out that this does not then make for a *racist* self, which would be to fall back into the reified notion of identity and would fail to recognize that I can take up antiracism as a way of engagement *and* continue to find myself with racist prejudices at the same time. The task at hand is to confront these states of mind in a creolizing way, which is to take ownership of a self that, "runs away" from me insofar as I am not its sole author. Indeed, the ambiguity for which Monahan's analysis accounts muddles the very assumption of there ever being a recognizable distinction between an internal self that I fully govern, and the external influences that are beyond my control. To couch this in more Levinasian terms, "the self is the other and the other is the self". In her taking responsibility to and for racism, the creolizing subject is very much like that Levinasian subject, in the sense that they are both called to identify with (and own) aspects of themselves that are "other within." This taking responsibility is not of the order of some legal ascription of guilt (though, for questions of material reparation as a response to historical injustice, such ascriptions would have their place). Rather, I take responsibility for my runaway (incomplete and "still in the process of becoming") self by responding to the call to be accountable for that (for my) self. One reads Monahan's warning against the antiracist "wallowing in guilt" to rest on this important distinction between guilt and accountability.

The presence of this "other"[1] in the creolizing subject further emphasizes the *ongoing* commitment to a practice of antiracism that, on Monahan's account, is sufficiently radical. This commitment is one that must be continuously renewed to the degree that one's task is never complete. The moment I think that it is, is precisely the moment I become most complicit in the practice of racism. This antiracist way is one of a continuously critical stance, with regard to one's social and political landscape, but especially with regard to oneself, which means that there is never a time when one's hands are completely clean, once and for all, of racism and its underlying implications. To be sure, I could always resort to the explanation that my being a "product" of a racially codified world means that the dirt on my hands is beyond my control. But (and this is Monahan's point) such a narrative subscribes to the binary "internal/external" logic of purity that precisely founds the practice of racism, and so remains diametrically opposed to an antiracist (creolizing) practice.

This means that the antiracist creolizing subject must live with bad conscience. She is obligated to account for a "runaway" self in possession of racist states of mind, and to do so without the guarantee of there being some end toward which this process aims. Vigilance against racism is not as much concerned with *non*racism as it is with racial justice. And this, to again borrow from Levinas, calls for "the attitude of a being that distrusts itself."[2] This is not the kind of distrust that makes it impossible to act, since the creolizing subject understands herself as an *active* contributor to the communal significations of race. Instead, the distrust that belongs to this critical attitude regards as suspect certain facades of completion, accomplishment and (quite frankly) closure, when it comes to endeavors to articulate a notion of race that is void of exploitation and domination.

Monahan makes a special effort to connect this critical attitude to the philosophical enterprise in general, and demonstrates the sense in which the creolizing subject has embarked upon the highest form of epistemological rigor. A politics of purity explicitly resists such rigor, in its valorization of closure, certainty and ultimately, clean consciences. Perhaps one could say that, under its dualistic logic, the absence of a clean conscience is the presence of a *guilty* one. Put differently, it may very well be the case that a logic of purity is unable to grasp the meaning of a perpetually bad conscience other than in terms of perpetual guilt. But instead of envisioning her "wallowing in guilt," this creolizing subject underscores what Monahan describes as a tenacity for moral openness

(or perhaps, moral ambiguity). Such openness would deny her the kind of ethical superiority of the "secure *non*racist." A bad conscience would be the impetus to perpetually call oneself into question, or to engage in the perpetual evaluation of oneself that is necessary for racial justice. The creolizing subject is committed to the *process* that is racial justice, like the lover of wisdom (the philosopher) is committed to "a knowing that is never finished" (216). Such journeys are particularly suited to those tolerant of ambiguity, and are no match for the "spiritually weak." But just as the life of the philosopher is tragic in the sense that her passion lives only to the degree that complete knowing remains out of reach, the antiracist tragically lives out an antiracism to the degree that the scales of racial justice are never fully balanced.

There is no explicit mention of nationalism in Monahan's work, but one can't help but wander into questions pertaining to national borders as one traces the implications of this reconstituted notion of antiracism. Does the fact that nationalisms seem to be founded on geographical borders mean that the nationalist is the philosophical anti-type of the creolizing subject? The former pursues fixed distinctions between "self" and "other" for the purpose of political sovereignty, whereas the latter embraces a world where such rigidity is unsustainable at best, and dehumanizing at worst.

On Monahan's account, we would be left to understand nationalism, at least in certain contexts, as a response to some internal threat to collective purity. Again, this is insofar as the core of such responses fixes the distinction between the internal citizen and the external foreigner (who, within this rubric, is always the enemy). But perhaps a different evaluation unfolds when we differentiate between the varied historical contexts out of which nationalisms emerge. There are instances where nationalism has been employed as a political response to colonialism's racist mechanisms of control and exploitation, and one is left to wonder whether these moments signify solely in terms of a pursuit toward collective purity. Can there be a mode of nationalism outside of the politics of purity, and as such, one that is not an enactment of the mythology (pathology) of racism? Monahan is sure to point out that it is not the case that creolization entails a *merging* of self and other, as though boundaries are unreal in some Hegelian march toward totalization. Rather, the creolizing way understands that these boundaries are plastic, moving, and in the never-ending process of transformation, precisely because they are objects of contestation and

renegotiation by the critically vigilant subject. Hence, the "villain" is not so much the boundary or the border, but rather the boundary or border that is closed, a fait accompli, a naturalized phenomenon that is never open to reevaluation.

Perhaps the creolizing subject, as conceived by Monahan, is positioned to reconceptualize the workings of borders, and thus generate what would be an antiracist nationalism. Beyond a dualistic logic of purity, borders are not "all or nothing," which means that they can be sufficiently dynamic as to condition a phenomenology of permeability. In this regard, the *creolizing* nationalist would understand the significance of national borders for the ex-colony's pursuit of political and economy autonomy, but would also understand that such borders (and the resulting practices that determine the conditions under which crossing and inclusion is permitted) remain open to perpetual scrutiny. The goal of this kind of nationalism would no longer be collective purity, but rather something akin to what George Mosse advocates in "Racism and Nationalism."[3] Mosse understands racism as a "totality consisting of claims to immutability and nonambiguity," very much the same way it is presented by Monahan in terms of an overall logic of purity. But of the relationship between racism and nationalism, Mosse writes, "Through nationalism [a flexible political ideology that created alliances among liberalism, conservatism and socialism] racism was able to transform [its] theory into practice. Racism was dependent upon nationalism, but nationalism itself could exist without any reliance on racism" (165). The overarching position of Mosse's paper is that, when we untie the historical bond between nationalism and racism, we get a version of the former that is not hell-bent on patriarchal longings for purity, consistency and stability (longings that require the vilification, dehumanization and inferiority of that which is deemed the unstable and ambiguous "other"). Instead, nationalism (without racism) serves as the vehicle of a "self-representation through symbols" (flags, anthems, festivals) that is not a self-representation of one's superiority over and against another's inferiority. More importantly, outside of the need for purity (and ultimate domination), this national "self" need not be reified into a fixed and well-defined "national/racism archetype" against which an individual's fitness for citizenship is determined. To be sure, a creolized negotiation of national self-representation would rest upon a fluid and dynamic notion of "self" that is only very ambiguously distinct from "nonself." Without the aggression of a racist logic, there is no countertype to the archetypical citizen, but

rather the ongoing process of an ever-evolving national self. Similarly, *The Creolizing Subject* determines that there is no counter-signification to what it means to *be* black, white, or mixed race, but rather the ongoing transformation of these racial significations.

In sum, *The Creolizing Subject* forces us to reconfigure what a genuinely antiracist praxis would be. It also asks us to ground this antiracist praxis in a conception of identity that is diachronous, or out of phase with itself, much like the account of identity one finds in Emmanuel Levinas' work. This open and fluid subject must acknowledge the inevitability of her racialized body and the inescapability of a history of racial domination and exploitation. In the end, Monahan provides an account of racial justice as an always vigilant worldview that not only negotiates racial meaning, but recognizes its responsibility to contest such meaning when it fails to capture the richness and ambiguity of our human condition.

NOTES

1. By "other" I refer to those residual racist states of mind that, without perpetual vigilance, develops into more explicitly racist ways of intersubjective engagement.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 82
3. George Mosse, "Racism and Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 1, no. 2 (1995): 163–73.

WRITING AFRICA INTO THE WORLD AND WRITING THE WORLD FROM AFRICA: MBEMBE'S POLITICS OF DIS-ENCLOSURE

Axelle Karera, Pennsylvania State University

The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe is arguably the most important African thinker in the humanities today. He is best known in the Anglo-American academic community through *On the Postcolony*, which appeared in English translation in 2001. *On the Postcolony* sought to rectify a long history of corrupt Western readings of Africa that, when not imposing reductionist analyses on the continent's cultural and political life, are plagued by essentialist visions of the "dark continent." Its reception is still subject to an unfolding intellectual drama in postcolonial and race studies. Much of the book has still not faced the same critical scrutiny that the introduction ("Time on the Move"), or even the infamous third chapter ("The Aesthetic