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**Analysis and discussion of the concept of ‘creolization’ with focus on
Édouard Glissant – between local “rootedness” and global application**

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Introduction

Considering today’s scientific reflections on concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘identity’, one can state a general emphasis on dynamism, transformation, fluidity and mixture, represented by keywords as “hybridization”, “métissage”, “bricolage” and also “creolization”. As Ulf Hannerz puts it: “...here we are now, with hybridity, collage, mélange, hotchpotch, montage, synergy, bricolage, creolization, mestizaje, mongrelization, syncretism, transculturation, third cultures and what have you...”¹

The reason for this attempt of breaking the assumption of static, demarcated, monolithic and solid cultures, identified by the quotation “a race – a culture – a language”, and simplistic dualisms, in favour of the above cited understanding of culture, is manifold: A proceeding interconnectedness of the world based on borderless economy and global governance shapes the recent understanding of globalization. However, the fact that different cultures step in contact and interact is not merely a economic phenomenon and, most importantly, not new: Historical research on “Eurasia”², a space interlinked by trade, conquest and settlement, exemplifies that mutual influence and exchange between Europe and Asia started in the 16th century. Some critics of the “hyperglobalizers” likewise assume that the contemporary world is actually less interconnected in comparison to the late 19th century when the imperial powers occupied nine-tenth of the surface territory of the globe. Especially slavery, colonialism and imperialism have marked a constant process of globalization and cultural contact. Considering this “anthropology of interconnectedness”³, it also becomes evident that relations of power and domination are inherent in concepts dealing with mutual permeation of cultural spheres. Particularly the theory of “creolization”, originating in the context of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean, carries at its core the diverse conflictual encounters between oppressed and oppressor. Furthermore, because of a complex history of diverse migrations and movement this region can be regarded as a “paradigm for modern syncretic cultures”⁴.

Though, instead of being applied singularly in this context, recent scholars, for example the above quoted Ulf Hannerz, use the term “creolization” in order to reflect on general

¹ Ed. by Ahmed, Sara. Castaneda, Claudia. Fortier, Anne-Marie. Sheller, Mimi. Uprootings / Regroundings. Questions of home and migration. Berg. Oxford 2003 , p. 284

² Gunn, Geoffrey C. First globalization : the Eurasian exchange, 1500 to 1800. Rowman & Littlefield, 2003

³ Hannerz, Ulf. Flows, boundaries and hybrids: Keywords in transnational anthropology. Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University (Research paper), p. 3

⁴ Ed. by Ahmed, Sara. Castaneda, Claudia. Fortier, Anne-Marie. Sheller, Mimi. Uprootings / Regroundings. Questions of home and migration. Berg. Oxford 2003 , p. 275

phenomenons of cultural encounter. The aim of this paper will be, inter alia, to discuss the implications of “unhinging” a theoretical concept out of its original frame of meaning. Because of emphasizing at the same time the original context and enlarging his theory of creolization on today’s entire world, the focus of this paper will lie on the Martinican scholar, writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant⁵. A wider analysis of the theory of “creolization” that would comprise more authors goes beyond the scope of this paper.

After giving a short overview on Édouard Glissant’s theoretical concept of “creolization” and its significance for recent cultural studies, today’s extensive use by several scholars – detached from its original background – will be discussed in order to, in a last part, exemplify the apparent complexity while applying the concept to an actual phenomenon of migration and métissage.

1. The main outlooks of Édouard Glissant’s concept of ‘creolization’

3.1. The concept’s origins: the Creole language

Glissant deduces the term “creolization” from the origins of the Creole language, a “composed language, that evolved out of the contact of diametrically distinct linguistic elements”⁶ – European and non-European languages: The colonial masters, e.g. on Martinique, spoke a more or less standardised French among each other and a simplified “Pidgin”-version with the slaves deported from different regions Africa to the Island. In order to prevent communication between the slaves, the members of one language group were separated. „It therefore became a question, for the slaves, of developing within the common language strategies for nevertheless eluding the master’s comprehension.”⁷ Out of a reduced form of the dominating language and surviving elements of local, indigenous languages, a *lingua franca* evolved which was handed on from generation to generation and expanded to a Creole language, composed of “African-derived grammar and European-derived vocabulary”⁸. Because of this appropriation and transformation of the masters “childish babble”⁹ into an autonomous mean of communication, Creole can be understood as a “subversive language whose purpose from the start was not simply to communicate but also

⁵ When necessary, the quotations have been translated into English.

⁶ Glissant, Édouard. *Kultur und Identität – Ansätze zu einer Poetik der Vielheit*. Das Wunderhorn. Heidelberg 2005, p. 16

⁷ Britton, Celia M. *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*. University Press of Virginia 1999, p. 25

⁸ Vaughan, Megan. *Creating the Creole island: slavery in eighteenth-century Mauritius*. Duke University Press. Durham 2005, hence: *Speaking Slavery Language in Eighteenth Century Mauritius*

⁹ Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. University Press of Virginia. 1989, p. 20

to conceal its meanings, thereby turning the master's language against him"¹⁰ or "principal site of resistance"¹¹. We can conclude that power relations between master and slave are firmly inscribed in its structures: Creole is at the same time "the language of the Master's command and power as much as of the slave's struggle and identity"¹², though, can not be seen as the Martinicans native language, as the indigeneous population and their culture had been killed and the slaves had been dispossessed of their original languages, cultures and identities. "[Martinique E.K.]... is a community without a national language. French is the langue imposée – the imposed language – and Creole is the langue non-posée – the nonsituated language."¹³ However, instead of only highlighting the traumatic "negative survival" of the colonial domination, Glissant sees in this "deficitairy", conflictual and tensed linguistic situation a chance to renovate, dynamize, open and overcome "classical", western concepts of identity and culture, based on essence, universalism and ancestry. Creole can thus be symbolic for a new understanding: "... as it arouse ouf of the contact between different, fragmented language communities, it has no singular ,organic' origin, but is instead [Glissant] 'organically linked to the worldwide exerieence of Relation. It is literally the result of links between different cultures and did not preexist these links. It is not a language of essence, it is a language of the Related.'"¹⁴

3.2. The idea of creolization

Based on these reflections of the emergence of Creole, Glissant develops his theory of creolization. The above cited "relatedness" being the main idea, two characteristics shape the process of creolization: Firstly, it constitutes a mutual penetration of cultural elements in form of "clashes, harmonies, deformations, retreats, repudations and attractions"¹⁵. Second attribute, constituting the main demarcating feature and thus shaping the uniqueness of the idea of creolization, is the unpredictability, of which the Creole, "fruit" of a conflictual contact between master and slave, is symbolical – "one can indeed foresee the outcomes of a métissage, but one cannot foresee the outcomes of a creolization"¹⁶. Furthermore, instead of as a category, creolization can be understood as a circular process of the constant dissolution

¹⁰ Britton, Celia M. *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*. University Press of Virginia 1999, p. 25

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 29

¹² *ibid.* p. 26

¹³ Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. University Press of Virginia. 1989, p. 161

¹⁴ Britton, Celia M. *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*. University Press of Virginia 1999, p. 16

¹⁵ Glissant, Edouard. *Kultur und Identität – Ansätze zu einer Poetik der Vielheit*. Das Wunderhorn. Heidelberg 2005, p. 15

¹⁶ Biondi, Carminella. Pessini, Elena. Bertini, Mariolina. *Du pays au tout-monde, écritures d'Edouard Glissant*. Colloque. Parma 1995, p. 149

of more or less solid differences while creating new realities inscribed in time and space, manifesting itself in uncountable versions and facettes. Besides, the basic feature of unpredictability implies that creolization can never be thought of as static but characterizes itself through its resistance against essence and absolute identities.

The “ideal” condition for the course of creolization is, following Glissant, the equality of the cultural elements exposed to each other. In contexts of value hierarchy, the process of creolization can take place, as the example of the Caribbean shows, but not completely and not in a symmetric way – leaving a “bitter rest”¹⁷.

According to Glissant, every culture finds its origin in creolization and today’s worlds differences are mainly a different temporality: “Atavistic cultures” have passed the process of creolization a long time ago, in order to, then, fix their cultural identity in the form of national myths and legitimate them through an idea of genesis and ancestry. In the contrary, “composite cultures” lack these last constructions: „Composite peoples, that is, those who could not deny or mask their hybrid composition, nor sublimate it in the notion of a mythical pedigree, do not “need” the idea of Genesis, because they do not need the myth of pure lineage.”¹⁸ As shown on the example of Creole, here again Glissant emphasizes the potential he sees in comparatively “young” nations with their history of slavery and colonialism, as the Caribbean, and their impossibility to “strike roots”.

3.3. Glissants utopia of the creolization of the world

Glissant advances the view, that “the term of creolization [] can be applied to the recent situation of the world, that is to say to a situation, in which a finally recognized ‘totality earth’ allows that in this totality (in which no ‘organic’ authority exists anymore, in which everything is archipelago) most distant and totally heterogeneous elements can be related to each other in a totally unsuspected way.”¹⁹ While acknowledging that the encounter of cultures not always happens in a positive way, e.g. through wars, Glissant affirms “that the world is creolizing” and creates the utopia of “All-World”: „My intuition is perhaps that there will be no more culture without all cultures, no more civilizations that can make others their colonies, no more poets that can ignore the movement of History.”²⁰ Glissant understands this

¹⁷ Glissant, Edouard. *Kultur und Identität – Ansätze zu einer Poetik der Vielheit*. Verlag Das Wunderhorn. Heidelberg 2005, p. 14

¹⁸ Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. University Press of Virginia. 1989, p. 121

¹⁹ Glissant, Edouard. *Kultur und Identität – Ansätze zu einer Poetik der Vielheit*. Verlag Das Wunderhorn. Heidelberg 2005, p. 14

²⁰ Britton, Celia M. *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*. University Press of Virginia 1999, p. 8

“whole of the world” as a „force field of possible trajectories, along which people move in a new, nonimperialist kind of traveling“²¹. The “errant” who discovers the world and while being conscient of the impossibility of this project, wants to understand her in her totality, would be the prototype of this new view of the world. Glissant underlines his philosophical thoughts, of whose utopian character he is fully aware, with elements of Chaos-theory: “The chaos is in the world, because the unpredictable is in the world.”²² Without downplaying the anxiety and fears this chaos-world might inspire to, Glissant defends his vision, pleading for a world in unity and freed of hierarchies: “The chaos is beautiful, when all components of it are considered as equally necessary. In the encounter of the cultures of the world we should win the imaginative force of seeing all the cultures, as if they would simultaneously realize a unity and freeing diversity.”²³

1.4. Conclusion

Glissant locates his philosophy of culture and identity in the region of his origin, the Caribbean, and uses the language Creole as a metaphore for his understanding and ideal of the emergence, transformation and mixing of cultures and identities. Hereby, he not only emphasizes the historical and cultural particularity of the region but, most importantly, a shift of perspective: As a “voice of the periphery”, scholars out of the formerly colonized world not only challenge the Western monopoly of science and knowledge production but also might provoke a shift in perception, mentality and conscience of the World, as different patterns and experiences shape their approach. Thus, further than only marking a switch in power relations between center and periphery, integrating “marginal voices” into our way of thinking enrichens and challenges traditional ways of thinking and perceiving culture and identity and, most ideally, represents a chance, while re-evaluating and re-considering global conflicts, to overcome old forms of domination and move into the direction of something like a common humanity or global community²⁴.

Having demonstrated the significance of, in this case, “Caribbean thought”, the fact of it being “overtaken” by Western scholars shall be observed in the next part.

²¹ Britton, Celia M. *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*. University Press of Virginia 1999, p. 123

²² Glissant, Edouard. *Kultur und Identität – Ansätze zu einer Poetik der Vielheit*. Verlag Das Wunderhorn. Heidelberg 2005, p. 47

²³ *ibid.* p. 54

²⁴ Considering the contemporary world’s most influential sphere, economy, and the predominance of the capitalist system, this might seem highly utopian. But still it still can be believed that a turn in the mentalities, shaped by education, tradition, media, the relation to the past etc. could have a positive impact on the human community on a global scale.

4. Discussion of different usages of the term of ‘creolization’

4.1. Brief history of the theory of ‘creolization’

Before showing how the concept of creolization has been adopted by European and American scholars in order to describe and analyze general processes of transnational cultural mixture and hybridization, it is important to give a short overview on previous usages of the term.

The concept of creolization emerged in the context of national projects linked to decolonization from the 1960s to the 1970s. One of the central theorists of these national independence movements in the formerly colonized regions is the Jamaican historian and poet Kamau Brathwaite, having formulated a “postcolonial response to the cultural anthropology of the Caribbean in the mid-twentieth century”²⁵. In the 1980s, the idea of creolization is transformed by the Caribbean diaspora, among others Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Édouard Glissant, “into a tool capable of challenging nationalist projects, forging more supple theory of non-essentialist identity formation and transnational belonging.”²⁶ While extending the basic idea of creolization as struggle against the colonial domination to a more general level of meaning and global sphere, these theorists do not miss to relate these new developments to the Caribbean origins.

“In sum, creolization has transmogrified from a politically engaged term used by Caribbean theorists, located in the Caribbean in the 1970s, to one used by Caribbean diaspora theorists located outside of the Caribbean in the 1980s, and finally to non-Caribbean ‘global’ theorists in the 1990s.”²⁷

4.2. Appropriation of the term ‘creolization’ by Western scholars

To illustrate what is referred to as “creolization paradigm” a quotation from Ulf Hannerz’, a Swedish anthropologist, can serve: “We all’re experiencing creolization due to the increasingly rapid and extensive interchange of capital, information, people and cultural objects between far-flung parts of the world.”²⁸

In his essay “The world in creolization” (1987), Hannerz defines “creole cultures” without reference to the history of slavery and colonialism. In stating that “creoleness” is the “new ‘global’ condition”, he not only neglects that creolization was, earlier, experienced in the

²⁵ Ed. by Ahmed, Sara. Castaneda, Claudia. Fortier, Anne-Marie. Sheller, Mimi. *Uprootings / Regroundings. Questions of home and migration*. Berg. Oxford 2003 , p. 279

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 286

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 273

Caribbean, but also the fact that Caribbean diaspora theorists, as shown in the first part of this work, had already worked on an extension of the concept. Thus, Caribbean thinkers, originating from a region which was long before “us” creole, are excluded of these recent accounts of the emergence of transnational global modernity.

The claim “We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos” from the US anthropologist James Clifford provokes similar questions: What about the specificity of the Caribbean experience? How can “we”, postmodern metropolitan culture, share the dynamic of being “Caribbean” without having experienced enslavement, colonial terror and resistance movement of decolonization? As the sociologist Mimi Sheller puts it: “Here I suggest that the language of universality and “we-ness” used by these theorists to describe this “new” global condition with which “we all” are now said to be living belies in a specifically located (Western, metropolitan, privileged) position of those using the concept in this way.”²⁹

Consequently, we can state that the difficulty of Western scholars “appropriating” the theory of creolization, “uprooting” and “regrounding” it, lies in the lack of acknowledgement firstly to the originators of the theory, who are in the most of the cases not cited, and more importantly to the context and local frame out of which it was created. In putting the concept of creolization at the side of general theories of cultural hybridization and global fluidity, “the specific itineraries of migration, resistance, and conflict out of which both “creole cultures” and Caribbean theories of Creolization emerged”³⁰, that is to say contexts of transatlantic slavery and colonialism get lost. The “migration to new homes” of theories and theorists comprises the “risk of being consumed within mainstream culture stripped of their oppositional meanings”³¹. However, instead of only referring to cultural mixing, creolization stands for a “process of *contention* [...] deeply embedded in the history of enslavement, racial terror and subaltern survival in the Caribbean.”, in “conflict, trauma, rupture and the violence of uprooting.”³² In other words, originally standing for a subaltern grass-roots resistance act against the power of a colonizing center, creolization in this recent use transforms into a term for a simple cultural mixing. “Creolization [...] was not simply about moving and mixing elements, but was more precisely about processes of cultural “regrounding” following experience of uprooting, or what Vergès refers to as ‘cultures of survival’.”³³ Thus, the Western appropriation of the term, happening out of a privileged position, can be considered

²⁹ Ed. by Ahmed, Sara. Castaneda, Claudia. Fortier, Anne-Marie. Sheller, Mimi. *Uprootings / Regroundings. Questions of home and migration*. Berg. Oxford 2003 , p. 274

³⁰ *ibid*, p. 275

³¹ *ibid*, p. 284

³² *ibid*, p. 281

³³ *ibid*, p. 280

as an “exercise of power”, reflecting not only an ongoing form of domination and paternalism, but also a misunderstanding of the concept in itself. The sociologist Mimi Sheller even speaks of a process in which “metropolitan global theory pirated peripheral theory for the reproduction of its own discourses of power.”³⁴ We can conclude that the dislocated notion of creolization “denies the rootedness that has enabled Caribbean ‘creole’ cultures to recreate homes away from home in the face of colonial dislocation and racial terror.”³⁵

And to sum up: “When the concept is used in a more general sense, with little attention to structural inequalities, it is reduced to a bland kind of cultural mixing which “we” – the urban, hybrid, heteroglot – all share. This failure to recognize the more critical and political implications of the term as used by Caribbean theorists leaves the current ‘creolization paradigm’ with little to contribute to an operative theory of conflict and unequal power relations.”³⁶

4.3. Conclusion

Instead of using the concept of creolization for a vision of global culture, emerging out of a privileged Western position of free movement and cultural supremacy, it should be employed in the conscience of its Caribbean roots and particular political meaning of subaltern agency. While Western scholars are indeed able to cherish a predicted global encounter and mixing of cultures, the situation of peripheral, formerly colonized parts of the world still have to struggle with the “negative survival” of centuries of oppression, restrictions in movement and economic problems: “If some borders are dissolving in the “world of creolization”, it should not go without saying that others are being kept in place.”³⁷

Mimi Sheller opts for an understanding of creolization as a “movement away from origin”, a “process of modification, involving rejection, adaptation, accomodation, imitation and invention, ending eventually in a dynamic new ‘type’ which is recognized as belonging to the locale but continuing to interact with new influences.”³⁸ Her formula “achieved indigeneity” reflects this claim of belonging to a locale but a belonging “grounded in movement, difference and transformation rather than stasis or permanence.”³⁹

³⁴ Ed. by Ahmed, Sara. Castaneda, Claudia. Fortier, Anne-Marie. Sheller, Mimi. *Uprootings / Regroundings. Questions of home and migration*. Berg. Oxford 2003 , p. 278

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 287

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 286

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 287

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 275

³⁹ *ibid.* p. 276

In conclusion, we can state with the words of Mimi Sheller again that creolization “also carries the connotation of a mobility and mixture of peoples, cultures, languages and cuisines, but in a way which specifically privileges subaltern agency against the power of a colonizing ‘centre’”⁴⁰.

5. Attempt of synthesis: Application of the concept of ‘creolization’ on a recent example of German-Turkish migration

While, indeed, the “off-rooted” application of creolization theory on Western phenomena of cultural mixture is insufficient, I nevertheless believe that it can be useful as a useful tool of analysis, as in every society power inequalities continue to exist, especially between the majority society and its politics and minority groups, as for example migrants. The example of young German-Turks aspiring to move to the country of their parents can serve as an example of creolization. Primarily, I will give a short overview over the case:

In the last years, a phenomenon of increasing “re-migration” of young German university graduates with Turkish background in the home country of their parents and grandparents attracts the attention of researchers, inter alia. According to a quantitative study⁴¹ 84% of the interrogated young “German-Turks” are satisfied with their life in Germany, but merely 37% feel “at home” and 38% want to “go back” to Turkey. To continue, 80% of the interrogated people stated that they had no trust in German integration politics. On the one hand, economic reasons play a significant role. 21% accentuate that because of their bicultural profile, the chance to make a career is higher in Turkey than in Germany, where, in spite of very good academic results, they don’t find a way into the working world. Far more important, however, are “emotional reasons”: Out of the 38% “aspirants to re-migration” 42% forward the reason of missing a feeling of home. Negative patterns of thought, stigmatizing discourses and in general a disdainful perception of the young people as “foreigners” by the majority of German people constitute a considerable obstacle for the identification with the German society. The other side of this refusal is the idealization and mythification of Turkey as the country of warmth, recognition and closeness, in short, the home. First statements on Internet blogs and in newspaper articles show that the re-migration is in fact “emotionally difficult” and the hoped finding of “home” is not fulfilled: In Turkey, these young “German-

⁴⁰ Ed. by Ahmed, Sara. Castaneda, Claudia. Fortier, Anne-Marie. Sheller, Mimi. *Uprootings / Regroundings. Questions of home and migration*. Berg. Oxford 2003, p. 276

⁴¹ These indications all refer to the recent study „Turkish Academics and Students in Germany“, realized by the *futureorg Institute for Applied research about Future and Organization*, between December 2007 and January 2008

Turks” become “Almanci” and realize, that they are “strangers” both in German and in Turkish culture. The society doesn’t see “real Turks” in them what leads to the feeling of being “more foreigner in Turkey” than in Germany. However, instead of departing from the “disruption”-, or “in between all chairs”-paradigm, dominating in many studies about the third generation of “German-Turks”, the migration can be understood as an attempt to solve an identity conflict: The decision of wanting to live in the country of their parents or grandparents that, until a certain time, they only knew from vacation or tellings, is the expression of a wish, to, on the one hand, live elements of identity freely, which are perceived negatively in Germany, as for example religion and cultural particularities, on the other hand to make authentic experiences with the Turkish culture and society instead of passively overtaking descriptions and cultural praxises of the parents. The re-migration can be understood as an attempt to negotiate between and harmonize conflicting spaces of self-location and to find an “inner home” beyond national constructions and traditional belongings.

So in what way can this phenomenon illustrate the idea of creolization? First of all, these young people have grown up with the challenge of negotiating and conciliating two cultural and societal backgrounds. However, more than only harmonizing, thus “mixing”, two cultural spheres, the majority of young German-Turks is confronted to exclusionary practices, discrimination and stigmatization, consequently, the “identity location” takes place in a force field of manifold power relations. Turning towards Turkey – a country, which is, in the eyes of the majority society still widely associated to backwardness, traditionalism and various restrictions on freedom, is a covert act of resistance against the exclusionary and assimilating State and society and a claim for the free expression of identity-relevant practices and beliefs. At the same time, the migration experience can be seen as a “movement away from origin” towards the hopes of a new home, thus, a “claim of belonging” not to one static and permanent sphere, but a “third space”, a moving and transforming “locale”, comprising elements both of German and of Turkish society and culture. The humorous and partly ironic participation in traditional German activities, as for example painting eastereggs, in an institution founded especially for German-Turks in Istanbul (“Rückkehrerstammtisch”), also illustrates the emergence of a “creolized” reality.

Conclusion

The brief outlook on Édouard Glissant's thoughts and analysis of creolization have shown that, while keeping the track on the Caribbean origins of the concept, the enlargement of wider phenomena and areas is possible. Admittedly, Glissant's extension of creolization on the world is more an utopian vision than a scientific prognosis but as mentioned above, especially in the context of demonizing media discourses and the disputed, but in many circles popular thesis of a "clash of civilizations" advanced by S.L. Huntington, Glissant's hopeful and positive vision can contribute to enlarge and open our mentalities and modes of thought in order to promote the idea and ideal of a "common humanity" and anchor it in our heads.

Furthermore, the "uprooting" and "regrounding" of the theory of creolization was criticised as its original meaning was detoured. The last exemplification, however, could demonstrate that the application of the concept is indeed possible in the European context given that unequal power relations exist in every society and especially in the context of migration, cultural métissage always means a situation of conflict and resistance against "integrating", meaning often assimilating and neglecting forces. Of course, this situation cannot be compared to the experiences of enslavement and colonial oppression, but the feature at the core of it – a power exercised by a majority, a "centre" against a minority, the "periphery" – is a universal one and can only be challenged, deconstructed and finally overcome by resistance movements, creative fusions, shifts of perspective, in summary, by what Sheller calls "subaltern agency".

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