

Working Paper No. 2, 2018

**Conviviality in (Post)Colonial Societies:
Caribbean Literature in the Nineteenth Century**

Gesine Müller



Mecila:
Working
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The Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America (Mecila), Rua Morgado de Mateus, 615, São Paulo – SP, CEP 04015-902, Brazil.

Executive Editors: Sérgio Costa, Lateinamerika-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
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Editing/Production: Susanna Klengel, Sérgio Costa, Nicolas Wasser, Paul Talcott

This working paper series is produced as part of the activities of the Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America (Mecila) funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

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Printing of library and archival copies courtesy of the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany.

Citation:

Müller, Gesine (2018): “Conviviality in (Post)Colonial Societies: Caribbean Literature in the Nineteenth Century”, *Mecila Working Paper Series*, No. 2, São Paulo: The Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America.

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Gesine Müller

Abstract

The Caribbean has in recent decades consistently been one of the privileged sites for theoretical production, including the attempt to look concretely at conviviality in the Caribbean and its diaspora. One question that is still being asked is how to grasp ethnic difference without falling back into essentialisms. This paper asks about the norms and the forms of knowledge about conviviality in Caribbean literatures of the nineteenth century, as the discourses of racism were being established and the question of conviviality was negotiated very intensely. The question is to what degree it is possible to critically challenge essentialist constructions in an era that has gone down in history as the heyday of racism. Can a sharper look at representations of conviviality lead us to relativize canonized frames of nineteenth-century reference, such as race and nation?

Keywords: conviviality | Caribbean literature | 19th-century literature

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Norms of Knowledge about Conviviality, or Utopian Societal Models	5
3.	Forms of Knowledge about Conviviality. An Ethnographic Search, or the Question of the Distance and Separation from the Other	10
4.	Conclusion	14
5.	Bibliography	16

1. Introduction

The nineteenth-century world of the Caribbean islands can be read as a kaleidoscope of colonial structures and dynamics,¹ in which colonial experiences come together in a dense network within the sphere of influence of a great variety of hegemonic and peripheral systems and give rise to dependence and separation, to exchange and confrontation. A look at this kaleidoscope-like world can give us completely new insights into the early processes of cultural globalization. Migration, circulation, and interconnections among the most diverse geographical areas, along with rootlessness and a lack of direction, are considered to be characteristics of our societies of today. But these phenomena of deterritorialization can already be observed in the Caribbean islands in the nineteenth century, where, for example, pirates and slave traders sailed back and forth between empires and continents; writers fled from one exile to the next; and illiterate peddlers served as messengers between worlds. This is what makes the nineteenth-century Caribbean a fascinating starting point for the examination of different figurations of conviviality.

It is mostly not until the early twenty-first century that there have been attempts within cultural theory to programmatically understand a conviviality in peace and difference.² These attempts have come about as a response to an unsuccessful labeling of multiculturalism or as a rejection of an essentialist concept of identity. For the indicated reasons, it makes sense that the current debates on this topic include vigorous contributions by Caribbean intellectuals and intellectuals of the Caribbean diaspora. This region, which is so rich in literature,³ has in recent decades consistently been one of the privileged sites for theoretical production: one has to think only of negritude, *créolité*, and relationalism, to begin with. Within this chronological sequence, there has also been an attempt to look concretely at conviviality in the Caribbean and its diaspora and to use that as a basis for developing universal categories, as Édouard Glissant (*Poetics of Relation*) and Antonio Benítez Rojo (*The Repeating Island*), first and foremost, have done. In the process, one question that is still being asked is how to grasp ethnic difference without falling back into essentialisms. In a way that is similar to the critique of multiculturalism by leading intellectuals in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, such as Arjun Appadurai and Paul Gilroy, Walter Mignolo looks back quite critically on the discourses of *créolité*:

1 These island worlds always operate according to their own rules of logic. See Ette's theories about islands (2016: 135). See also Ette 2009: 32, and Müller 2011.

2 The following explanations are taken in passages from a translation of my article Müller 2012. I am grateful to Mary Deer for the translation. On the particularly significant challenges of establishing the basic principles of conditions of conviviality on the worldwide scale in the fourth phase of accelerated globalization, see Ette: 2010a: 169-70, 183.

3 The Caribbean has made a particular name for itself as a privileged region for "literatures without a fixed abode", see Ette 2016: 126-56.

Creoles, Caribbeanness, and Creoleness are still categories that overlap but which belong to different levels. Being or defining oneself as Creole means identifying a group of people, differentiating them from others. Thus, to say that “neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles” is an identification in relation to a territory, and to the historical processes that created that territory (Mignolo 2012: 241; citation from Bernabé et al. 1990: 886).

But what response is there to this critique? Glissant calls his alternative model “creolization”,⁴

an encounter between cultural elements coming from completely different horizons and which in actuality creolize themselves . . . in order to produce something completely unpredictable. . . . The creolization that takes place in the New America, and the creolization that is taking over the other Americas, is the same one that operates in the entire world. The thesis that I will defend . . . is that *the world is becoming creolized*, that is to say that the cultures of the world, connected with each other today in an electrifying and totally conscious way, change themselves by exchanging themselves through irremediable clashes and pitiless wars but also advances of conscience and hope (Glissant 1996: 15).⁵

Because it is not possible to understand the specific postcolonial situation in which Caribbean societies find themselves today without examining their colonial dimensions—Benítez Rojo, in *The Repeating Island*, already referred to the mutual conditionality of today’s discourses of *créolité* and the historic plantation economy⁶—I would like to take a look now at a particularly interesting and complex phase of Caribbean colonialism, namely the nineteenth century. What is the particular content of the literary potential for

4 For a valuable and manifold approach to creolization see Collier and Fleischmann 2003.

5 “une rencontre d’éléments culturels venus d’horizons absolument divers et qui réellement se créolisent . . . pour donner quelque chose d’absolument imprévisible. . . . [L]a créolisation qui se fait dans la Néo-Amérique, et la créolisation qui gagne les autres Amériques, est la même qui opère dans le monde entier. La thèse que je défendrai . . . est que *le monde se créolise*, c’est-à-dire que les cultures du monde mises en contact de manière foudroyante et absolument consciente aujourd’hui les unes avec les autres se changent en s’échangeant à travers des heurts irrémissibles, des guerres sans pitié mais aussi des avancées de conscience et d’espoir”. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of passages quoted in this article are by Gesine Müller and Marie Deer.

6 In his classic essay *La isla que se repite* [this passage is absent from the English translation], the Cuban cultural theorist Antonio Benítez Rojo describes how it is necessary to confront the system of plantation society in order for any understanding of *créolité* to take place: “Well then, what connections do I see between the plantation and creolization? First of all, of course, a relation of cause and effect: without one we would not have the other. But I also see other connections”. (“Bien, entonces, ¿qué relaciones veo entre plantación y criollización? Naturalmente, en primer término, una relación de causa y efecto; sin una no tendríamos la otra. Pero también veo otras relaciones”, Benítez Rojo 1998: 396).

conviviality in nineteenth-century Caribbean literatures (cf. Ette 2010a: 80)? There are two levels to be distinguished:

- (1) The norms of knowledge about conviviality. By this I understand the explicit communication of a programme of good or ideal conviviality;
- (2) The forms of knowledge about conviviality. By this I understand the communication of a literary content of conviviality,⁷ a level that can be either explicitly or implicitly legible (cf. Ette 2010b: 989).

It goes without saying that in the nineteenth century, as the discourses of racism were being established, the question of conviviality was negotiated very intensely, given that the concept of race was a decisive one for the shaping of that century's political anatomy. As the concept was made scientific, it remained an important aspect of European geopolitics on their way to a global domination supported and legitimized by Darwin's recognitions (Gilroy 2004: 6). Considering the dominance of this ubiquitous expression of ethnic difference in that epoch, I would like now to look at conviviality from an ethnographic standpoint. While current approaches, such as those of Mignolo or Glissant, attempt to expose earlier concepts of identity as essentialist, the most challenging question with respect to the nineteenth century is to what degree it is possible to critically challenge essentialist constructions in an era that has gone down in history as the heyday of racism.

If we turn to the height of the Caribbean plantation economy, on the eve of the French Revolution, we can see that the decisive issue in the problem of human conviviality was not so much the how of it as the question of who was even allowed to call themselves human (see Meyer-Krentler 2012). Hans Blumenberg (2010) has vividly shown, in connection with the French Revolution, how ungraspable the concept of life is. Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes how, in July 1789, just a few days before the storming of the Bastille, plantation owners from Saint-Domingue came together in Paris to ask the new French National Assembly to include twenty deputies from the Caribbean among their ranks (Trouillot 2002: 90).⁸ The growers had arrived at this number by using the exact same methods used in France as well to calculate the distribution of representatives, but the growers had deliberately included the black slaves and the *gens de couleur* in their calculation of the island population, while never for a moment considering giving the vote to the nonwhites. Honoré Gabriel Riquetti, the Count of Mirabeau, took the floor in the session of July 3, 1789, to expose the absurdity of the growers' calculations:

7 This involves a knowledge "that is constantly in contact with the extra-literary living world, that can be understood . . . from the specific autonomy and internal meaning of literature" ("das stets im Kontakt mit der außerliterarischen Lebenswelt steht, [das] aus der spezifischen Eigengesetzlichkeit und dem Eigen-Sinn der Literatur heraus verstanden . . . werden kann", Ette 2010a: 114).

8 On this particular point, I rely directly on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's exposition.

Do the colonies count their Negroes and their *gens de couleur* as belonging to the category of human beings or to that of the beasts of burden? If the colonies would like to see the Negroes and the *gens de couleur* counted as human beings, they should first give them the right to vote, so that all could vote and all could be counted. If not, however, we would like to point out to them that in distributing the number of deputies across the population of France, we have taken neither the numbers of our horses nor those of our mules into consideration (Archives Parlementaires 1789, 8:186, cited in Trouillot 2002: 90).

Mirabeau wanted to convince the French National Assembly to reconcile the philosophical position of the declaration of human rights with the assembly's political position towards the colonies. However, the declaration spoke of the "rights of the human being and of the citizen", a title that was contradictory in itself.

Trouillot shows how, in the case at hand, the citizen triumphed over the human being, or at least over the nonwhite human being. The National Assembly allowed the Caribbean sugar colonies only six representatives. This was more than they would have been allotted on the basis of their white inhabitants alone, but significantly less than their numbers would have come to if the Assembly had recognized the full political rights of blacks and *gens de couleur*. Their pragmatic political calculations meant that the half a million slaves on Saint-Domingue/Haiti and several hundred thousand in the other colonies yielded exactly three deputies, who were of course white (Trouillot 2002: 91).

If the very definition of a person is already such a challenge, then the concept of life, which lies at the foundation of being, becomes even more complicated, leading directly to the question of conviviality. Can a sharper look at representations of conviviality lead us to relativize canonized frames of nineteenth-century reference, such as race and nation? The question of conviviality requires more differentiated answers than simply emphasizing an abolitionist novel's ethnic dimension and its contribution to the abolition of slavery. Nor, if we look at the question globally, can we just emphasize (for example) the evocation of a transcultural Cuba through a foundational fiction such as *Cecilia Valdés*. In other words, this is about more than just literature with a social agenda.

The examples I use extend across a little more than the nineteenth century; concretely, they are from the years 1789 to 1886, spanning the time from the launching of the French Revolution's idea of equality to the abolition of slavery on the last Caribbean island, namely Cuba. This period of time thus corresponds to the fundamental shift in the image of humankind and of society that took place over the course of the nineteenth century and that was also transported to the colonial realms. The year 1848, when slavery was ended in the French colonial empire, represents a central dividing line.

Thus, the texts are grouped around an event that radically changed societies or, in the case of the Spanish colonies, brought the question of abolition much closer to the surface again because of what was happening in the immediate vicinity.

The question of the forms and norms of knowledge about conviviality always includes the act of reading. Without attempting here to undertake a reception-oriented investigation, I do want to note that almost all of the textual examples are the literary documentations of a writing Creole upper class, which, while it is not even close to mirroring the overall state of a society, did however bear the sole decisive responsibility for the establishment of the dominant discourses and therefore can be said to have been writing an *écriture blanche* (Bremer 1982: 336) and therefore being read by a small minority.

2. Norms of Knowledge about Conviviality, or Utopian Societal Models

Outre-mer, the 1835 novel by the *Béké* author Louis de Maynard de Queilhe, a member of the Creole upper class from the French colony of Martinique, sketches the utopia of a peaceful slave society. The protagonist, Marius, a mulatto, parrots the slogans about equality that he picked up during his time in Paris and gets worked up over the racial fanaticism in his country of origin, only to realize, little by little, after his return home, how unrealistic the French Revolution's egalitarian ideas are and how completely they ignore the colonial reality and the actual inequality and unequal worth of people of different skin colors and backgrounds. At first, his words almost anticipate the later positions of negritude, and he even goes so far as to buy a black woman and free her in order to marry her. But he is soon brought back to hard facts and realizes that there are worlds of separation between them. It becomes clear to Marius that he can only love a "real woman": in other words, a white woman.

In a process of clarification, along the lines of the classical coming-of-age novel, Marius painstakingly comes to the realization that the philanthropic ideas coming out of certain circles in Paris and London are wrong to discredit the well-established plantation system.

He had been told that they were exposed to the elements in all seasons and weathers, defenseless and without clothes; what he learned was that these men received two jackets and two pairs of pants every year, the women two jackets and two skirts, and that if one sometimes saw them half-naked, it was because they found that more pleasant. . . . Their work brought with it no suffering nor pains. It is true that at certain intervals, the whip rang out, but in the air and not on the slave's back, and it was only to incite the zeal of those who had fallen asleep or to be heard by those who were farther away. The earth was by no

means drenched in their sweat, but perhaps it was drenched in the syrup that they were never refused and were accustomed to drink diluted in water. . . . He had been told there would be many cries and groans, and all he heard was laughing and chatter (Maynard de Queilhe 1835, 1: 105-6).⁹

This example represents the model of an ideal conviviality based on a societal order in which everyone has his or her place and in which the slaves are treated very well. A similar worldview is expressed in *Les amours de Zémédare et Carina*, a colonial pro-slavery novel by Auguste Prévost de Sansac. It develops the picture of a Creole slave owner who is primarily a protector:

The fair master is always well served by his slaves, esteemed by his compatriots, and protected by the government. The cruel master . . . there isn't any among the white men on Martinique; looked on with horror by all, he would soon be forced to leave the island. Without trying to justify slavery here, I simply observe that the world's earliest records speak of its existence: we have seen it persist across all the centuries, and even in Sparta, the most republican of all governments. It has never been possible to successfully entrust the cultivation of the soil in the tropics to white men; they cannot endure this arduous work. The Negroes, all across the vast expanse of the coast of Africa, only use their freedom to satisfy their stupid ferocity, to make war on each other, to destroy and devour each other. In our colonies, in contrast, see their gaiety, their pleasures, and the moderation of their work; they are without worries for the future; they know love and can freely enjoy the happiness of being fathers. . . . Laborers of Europe, . . . and you especially, you serfs attached to the land in Poland and in Russia; you whom we so often see anxious about your existence and that of your family: tell us whether the Negroes in the colonies are the unhappiest beings on earth (Prévost de Sansac 1977: 61).¹⁰

9 "On lui avait dit qu'on les exposait aux intempéries des saisons, sans défense, sans vêtements; et il apprenait que ces hommes recevaient par an deux casaques et deux caleçons, les femmes deux casaques et deux jupes: que si parfois on les voyait à moitié nus c'est que cela leur était plus agréable. . . . A ces travaux ne se joignaient ni douleurs ni peines. Par intervalles certes le fouet retentissait, mais en l'air et non sur le dos de l'esclave et c'était uniquement pour exciter l'ardeur des endormis ou pour se faire entendre des plus éloignés. La terre n'était point arrosée de leurs sueurs mais peut-être du sirop qu'on ne leur refuse en aucun temps, et qu'ils ont l'habitude de boire délayé dans l'eau. . . . On lui avait annoncé beaucoup de cris et de gémissements, et il ne les entendait que rire et jaser".

10 "Le maître juste est toujours bien servi par ses esclaves, estimé de ses compatriotes et protégé par le gouvernement. Le maître inhumain . . . il n'en existe point parmi les hommes blancs, à la Martinique, vu avec horreur par tous, on le forcerait bientôt à sortir de l'île. Sans vouloir chercher à justifier ici l'esclavage, j'observai seulement que les premiers annales du monde parlent de son existence: on l'a vue se maintenir dans tous les siècles, et même à Sparte, le plus républicain de tous les gouvernements. La culture des terres, entre les tropiques, n'a jamais pu être confiée, avec succès, à des hommes blancs; ils n'y peuvent résister à ce travail pénible. Les nègres, dans toutes la vaste étendue de la côte d'Afrique, n'usent de leur liberté que pour assouvir leur stupide férocité,

While the pro-slavery attitude of someone like Maynard de Queilhe and Prévost de Sansac is symptomatic of the writers of the plantation-owner class in the French Antilles, there are certainly also utopian future-oriented projects that have a positive view of the mixture of the “races”. It is not a coincidence that these often arise in the colonial centers. Thus, a year after the publication of *Outre-mer*, one could read about the utopia of a new mixed race in the anti-slavery journal *Revue des colonies*:

From these whites, from these blacks, from these reds, there will be founded a mixed race of Europeans, Africans, and Americans, which within several generations and through various interminglings will arrive, by way of brown, caramel, plum—dear sir, orange-ish—at a pale yellow, lightly coppered. All of these singularities, all these marvels of civilization that elevate and interest our heart and our spirit, are more or less near (*Revue des Colonies*, III.i: 20-21).¹¹

This quotation communicates a very unusual norm of knowledge about conviviality for that time: the intermixing that is soon to come, with its unpredictable results, will lead to marvels of civilization. The word that best encapsulates the *Revue*’s revolutionary project is “fusion”: as expressed in its foreword, the *Revue* was founded with the goal of influencing public opinion through:

an always sensible and straightforward, but vigorous and never timid, discussion of the causes, whatever they might be, that are hindering the desirable fusion of the colonies’ various peoples (*Revue des Colonies*, I.i: 3, cited in Bongie 2002: 449).¹²

It wants to break down the racial segregation that structures colonial society. This is shown particularly clearly in Bissette’s article on the English colonies: “De l’émancipation des esclaves, considérée comme premier élément du progrès social aux colonies” (On the emancipation of slaves, considered as the first element of social progress in the colonies; *Revue des Colonies*, I.vii: 3-14, and cf. Bongie 2002: 449). In that article, he notes that

se faire la guerre, se détruire et se dévorer entr’eux. Dans nos colonies, au contraire, voyez leur gaieté, leurs plaisirs et la modération de leur travail; ils sont sans souci sur l’avenir; ils connaissent l’amour, et jouissent librement du bonheur d’être pères. . . . Journaliers d’Europe, . . . et vous surtout, serfs attachés à la glèbe en Pologne et en Russie; vous que l’on voit si souvent inquiets sur votre existence et sur celle de votre famille, dites-nous si les nègres, dans les colonies, sont les êtres les plus malheureux sur la terre”.

11 “De ces blancs, de ces noirs, de ces rouges, il se fondera une race mélangée d’Européens, d’Africains et d’Américains, qui en quelques générations et au travers des croisements divers, arrivera, par le brun, le carmelite, le prune—monsieur, l’orangé, à un jaune pâle, légèrement cuivré. Toutes ces singularités, toutes ces merveilles de civilisation qui élèvent et intéressent notre cœur et notre esprit, sont plus ou moins prochaines”.

12 Here I rely directly on Bongie’s fundamental analysis of the first issues of the *Revue des Colonies*, to which I have not had access.

production and material prosperity are moving ahead there and, in a very limited number of years, the fusion of the black and white races will turn these lands . . . into a country enjoying civil and political liberty and equality (*Revue des Colonies*, I.vii: 3-4, cited in Bongie 2002: 449).

But, as Bongie points out, the idea of fusion is primarily concerned with the formation of a Caribbean society with its own customs (2002: 450).¹³ In the article “De la fusion des deux races aux colonies et des causes qui la retardant” (On the fusion of the two races in the colonies and on the causes that are delaying it; *Revue des Colonies*, I.vi: 3-7; cf. Bongie, 2002: 450), most likely written by Bissette, the creation of a post-racial “shared homeland” is also advocated:

In effect, it is impossible that, once legitimate grievances have been satisfied, resentments assuaged, the playing-field leveled out, the oppressors disarmed and punished, in a word, equal rights proclaimed and adequately protected by the public authorities, it is impossible, we say, that the white and black populations in the colonies should not fraternize and join together, in everybody’s best interests, to work the land in common, their shared homeland today, in which a better organization of labor and the development of an eminently social feeling of the fraternity of man will turn it for them into a homeland that is as beloved as it is free, industrious and prosperous (*Revue des Colonies*, I.vi: 3, cited in Bongie 2002: 450).

In a representative example from the Spanish Caribbean, we find yet a different look at ethnic constellations. This is a quotation from a correspondence between Domingo del Monte and Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel, and it could be considered as paradigmatic of the categories that organized the thought and discussion of the first half of the century. It shows that in Cuba, too, clearly defined racial attributions still worked, but that unlike in the French-speaking Caribbean, the positive potential of the blacks was emphasized as a source of Romantic literature. Thus, in 1850, Tanco writes to del Monte:

And what do you say to *Bug Jargal*? I would like us to use the style of that novel for writing among ourselves. Think about it. The Negroes of the island of Cuba are our poetry, and we must not think about anything else; but not just the Negroes but the Negroes with the whites, all mixed up together, and then to make up the paintings, the scenes, which must of necessity be infernal and diabolical; but also certain and evident. This emerged through our Victor Hugo, and all of a sudden we know what we are, painted with the truth of poetry, since we already know the sad misery in which we live through numbers and

¹³ More than a century later, the Barbadian poet and cultural historian Kamau Brathwaite analyses the development of such a Caribbean society in his pioneering study of processes of creolization. Cf. Bongie 2002: 450.

philosophical analysis (Letter from Félix Tanco to Domingo del Monte, dated February 13th, 1836, in Gómez de Avellaneda 1976: 46).¹⁴

Starting in about 1860, a new group appeared in the Spanish Caribbean: the Puerto Rican intellectuals Ramón Emeterio Betances and Eugenio María de Hostos and the Cuban writer Antonio Maceo discovered that they shared the same history (Gaztambide-Géigel 2011).¹⁵ Maceo was a committed anti-racist (Maceo Grajales 1948, 1950; cf. Zacair 2005). He was against slavery, the inequality of the races, and every form of oppression. His activism on behalf of better humanitarian conditions was linked to the struggle for colonial independence from Spain. For him, that implied an engagement on behalf of the “dignity of the black race”. And this in turn led Maceo, just like Betances, to a stronger orientation towards Haiti. Haiti, too, was supposed to become part of the new Caribbean federation. For Maceo, anti-racist and pro-Caribbean positions merged into one agenda, called *Caribbeanidad*, Caribbeanness.

For the Puerto Rican Eugenio María de Hostos, the Antilles constituted an abstract scenario in which he was not to set foot again until his return from Spain. His 1868 speech at the Ateneo de Madrid shows his definitive break with the Spanish liberals. He merges *Puertorriqueñismo*, *Antillanismo*, *Latinoamericanismo*, and *Americanismo*, speaking of the federation as the “absolute republic” (*república absoluta*) and the “absolutely free alliance of all national biases” (*alianza libérrima de todas las parcialidades nacionales*). What all of these concepts have in common for Hostos is that they do not refer only to a purely geographical territory but can also be understood as a utopian construct (Gaztambide-Géigel 2011):

What are the Antilles? The link, the point of union between the fusion of European types and ideas from North America, and the fusion of races and disparate characters that Colombia (Latin America) painfully realizes (Hostos 1988a, cited in Gaztambide-Géigel 2011: 436).¹⁶

During his stay in New York, he gives a clear geopolitical definition:

14 “Y qué dice V. de Bug Jargal? Por el estilo de esta novelita quisiera yo que se escribiese entre nosotros. Piénselo bien. Los negros en la isla de Cuba son nuestra poesía, y no hay que pensar en otra cosa; pero no los negros solos, sino los negros con los blancos, todos revueltos, y formar luego los cuadros, las escenas, que a la fuerza han de ser infernales y diabólicas; pero ciertas y evidentes. Nazca por nuestro Víctor Hugo, y sepamos de un avez lo que somos, pintados con la verdad de la poesía, ya que conocemos por los números y el análisis filosófico la triste miseria en que vivimos”.

15 The three intellectuals named here were not the only ones carrying on the kinds of debates that we will be describing, but these three were particularly prominent.

16 “¿qué son las Antillas? El lazo, el medio de unión entre la fusión de tipos y de ideas europeas de Norte América y la fusión de razas y caracteres dispares que penosamente realiza Colombia [la América Latina]”.

the natural geographic midpoint between one part and another of the Continent, manufacturer also of a transcendental fusion of races, the Antilles are, politically, the scale's pointer, the true federal bond of the gigantic federation of the future, socially, *humanly*, the natural center of the fusions, the definitive crucible for the races. (Hostos, "Diario", cited in Gaztambide-Géigel 2011: 436-37).¹⁷

For Hostos, the idea of a conviviality of the races has both a political and a cultural aspect: "the unity of liberty for the federation of nations; the unity of the races for the fusion of all of them". He proclaims the "confederation of all of the Antilles and, as a future goal, the fusion of the Latin race in the new continent and in the archipelago of the Caribbean Sea" (Letter to J.M. Mestre, November 7 1870, cited in Gaztambide-Géigel 2011: 437).¹⁸

The idea of the peaceful conviviality of ethnic groups is completely merged with that of the Antillean confederation (cf. Gewecke: 1996: 111) in Hostos's speech "En el Istmo" (In the isthmus). For Hostos, as for his colleagues, the idea of race is not developed in any differentiated way and is internally contradictory. For Hostos, too, the essentialist dimension remains the basis for a conviviality. On the one hand, he identifies a "true Antillean race" (*verdadera raza de las Antillas*) as a fusion of African, Latin, and American elements. On the other hand, however, his discourse of the "white race" and "subraces" partakes of the racist discourse coming from Europe.

So, while discourses of difference are what mark the thinking of Hostos, Betances, and Maceo, these discourses are productively implemented here, in contrast to earlier texts. The Caribbeanness of someone like Maceo is intended to dissolve difference. The fact that this idea, as a utopia, very much along the lines of Hostos's thinking, reaches beyond the Caribbean archipelago speaks for its universal dimension.

3. Forms of Knowledge about Conviviality. An Ethnographic Search, or the Question of the Distance and Separation from the Other

Let us now turn our gaze away from normative attempts to project conviviality and concentrate instead on forms of knowledge (Ette 2010b: 990). These are manifested in explicit or implicit attempts at self-positioning or positioning of the Other. Thus J. Levilloux, a writer colleague of Maynard de Queilhe's from Martinique, for example,

17 "medio geográfico natural entre una y otra parte del Continente, elaborador también de una fusión trascendental de razas, las Antillas, son, políticamente, el fiel de la balanza, el verdadero lazo federal de la gigantesca federación del porvenir; social, humanamente, el centro natural de las fusiones, el crisol definitivo de las razas".

18 "unidad de la libertad por la federación de las naciones; unidad de las razas por la fusión de todas ellas"; "la confederación de todas las Antillas y, como fin por venir, la liga de la raza latina en el nuevo continente y en el archipiélago del Mar Caribe".

takes a decidedly critical look at the ethnic caste system in his *Les créoles ou la vie aux Antilles* (Creoles or life in the Antilles, 1835).

The whites rain contempt on the mulattos. These leave the hatred of envy to their fathers and take revenge on the blacks for the degrading nuance of skin to which they are heir. On their side, the Negroes, recognizing the superiority of the whites, reject the pretensions of the colored class, conspiring against the ones because they are the masters and hating the others because they want to be that (Levilloux 1835: 9-10).¹⁹

Here it becomes clear that the ethnic caste system, which is often proclaimed to be normative, is in fact constantly called into question by all the groups involved. From every side, people try to break down the barriers. Levilloux's depiction of the whites is also revealing:

the Creoles, descendants of the European colonists: intellectual lightweights, generally uncultivated, but lively, penetrating, passionate about marvels and disdainful of Europe's philosophical knowledge (Levilloux 1835: 19).²⁰

The actual situation, involving a self-evident definitional clarity, is relativized by the astonishing self-critique of a white author from Guadeloupe who acknowledges a lack of intelligence. We see very clearly here that whiteness does not always mean the same thing. Who are the Creoles? Which white person is writing for which whites?

At one point in Levilloux, it becomes evident to what degree the uncertainty of whiteness is directly related to the Creole upper class's fear, usually a fear of losing the privileges of the good old days: "Men felt the old world wearing away under their feet and were already throwing themselves towards that future, already so near, in which a new society was to be rebuilt" (Levilloux 1835: 21).²¹ The good old days are the prerevolutionary days, and in an echo of the trauma of the French Revolution, on the eve of the abolition of slavery in the French colonial empire, people are reminded of the eve of 1789. People are afraid that in the future, new forms of conviviality will be developed. The unpredictable is frightening.

19 "Les blancs laissent tomber le mépris sur les mulâtres. Ceux-ci laissent à leurs pères la haine de l'envie et se vengent sur les noirs de la nuance dégradante d'épiderme dont ils sont héritiers. De leur côté, les nègres reconnaissant la supériorité des blancs repoussent les prétentions de la classe de couleur, conspirent contre les uns parce qu'ils sont maîtres, et haïssent les autres parce qu'ils aspirent à le devenir."

20 "Les créoles, descendants des colons européens: intelligences légères, en général incultes, mais vives, pénétrantes, enthousiastes du merveilleux, dédaigneuses des connaissances philosophiques de l'Europe".

21 "Les hommes sentaient le vieux monde s'abîmer sous leur pieds et se jetaient déjà vers cet avenir si prochain où devait se reconstruire une nouvelle société".

It is precisely in the attempt to grasp the indefinable in-betweenness of the mulatto's social position and self-positioning with respect to identity that the strenuous efforts on the part of whites to be white become visible:

We must not forget that the mulatto was not a man like other men but instead a reflection of those strong natural landscapes where precipices, poisonous plants, and nefarious animals abound but where one has to go, nevertheless, to find the most esteemed marvels of this universe (Maynard de Queilhe 1835, 2: 16).²²

Even the blacks pity the mulattos and perceive them as caught in a miserable in-between situation: the herbalist Iviane, in *Les créoles ou la Vie aux Antilles*, shows compassion for the protagonist, Estève, which Levilloux stages through a deliberately flawed French, thus relativizing the position of standard French as the single normative authority. It is interesting to note that the concept of the nation plays a role here as well. “‘Me possessed of God alone’, the old woman replied. ‘You mulatto, me Negress. My nation large in a large country. You not have a nation, you’” (Levilloux 1835: 104).²³

Similarly searching for an appropriate description of the mulatto, the *Revue des colonies* expresses it this way:

The Negro stems from pure blood; the mulatto, on the contrary, comes from mixed blood; he is a composite of the black and the white, a bastardized species. From this truth it is as obvious that the Negro is above the mulatto as it is that pure gold is above mixed, impure gold (*Revue des Colonies* November 1838: 277).²⁴

A strained requirement of purity has to do the job of drawing a barrier between blacks and mulattos by way of “blood”.

The literary passage in the pro-slavery quotation from Maynard de Queilhe on the theme of the impossibility of transferring ideas between the metropolis and the colony, which has already been introduced as a norm of knowledge about conviviality, takes on a new aspect as a form of knowledge about conviviality in *Les créoles ou la Vie aux Antilles*. In a letter to his son, the father issues a warning about the ideas of the French Revolution. In the colonies, there can be no equality:

22 “Le mulâtre, il ne faut pas l’oublier, ce n’était pas un homme comme un autre. C’était une image de ces fortes natures où les précipices, les plantes vénéneuses et les animaux malfaisants abondent, mais où néanmoins on doit aller chercher les merveilles les plus estimées de cet univers”.

23 “‘Moi possédée de Dieu seul, répliqua la vieille. Vous mulâtre, moi negresse. Nation à moi est grande dans un grand pays. Vous pas avoir une nation, vous’”.

24 “Le nègre est issu d’un sang pur; le mulâtre est au contraire issu d’un sang mélangé; c’est un composé du noir et du blanc, c’est une espèce abâtardie. D’après cette vérité, il est aussi évident que le nègre est au-dessus du mulâtre, qu’il l’est que l’or pur est au-dessus de l’or mélange”.

It is important, my son, to guard against the maxims and the theories that now invade all minds and to which the candor of your age makes you more vulnerable. Remember that you will soon have to return to Guadeloupe, where you will find a society that, although it allows one to feed oneself speculatively on these ideas of equality, forbids one to openly scorn conservative prejudices. I think I have seen, in your letters, a marked tendency to praise yourself for subscribing to those dogmas that you call regenerative, but which can only be that after they have killed us. This is now the time for me to say a word to you about connections that chance might cause you to form with young people of color that whites send to Europe. Do not stop at outward signs; they are often misleading. Sound out and question all of the Creoles, your comrades. The number of them must not be too large, and thus it will be easy to discover their origins and to escape from dangerous friendships which would become a source of regrets and vexations in the future, because you would not be able to enjoy a complete liberty in your connections when you return to the colonies. However great the energy of your will in this respect, you will not be able to fight against society, which will lay all of the weight of its customs and of its embodied ideas upon you. Remember that, my son, and while granting your benevolence, be careful not to match yourself, by bonds of friendship, with compatriots of color. I will not say more; may your reason light your way (Levilloux 1835: 23).²⁵

For our investigation, it is telling here that the form of a knowledge of a conviviality between ethnic groups, but also between white philanthropists in Paris and white Creoles who live in the colonies, is represented as a balancing act between norms and forms of knowledge about conviviality. Only in death can the dogmas of those philanthropic ideas be foreseen to be compatible with the living conditions in the colony. The clarity of the vision that stages the opposite of conviviality can be experienced as predictable, by definition, in the act of reading.

25 "Il est important, mon fils, de te prémunir contre les maximes et les théories qui envahissent maintenant tous les esprits, et auxquelles la candeur de ton âge te rend plus accessible. Songe que tu dois retourner bientôt à la Guadeloupe, où tu trouveras une société, qui, tout en permettant de se nourrir spéculativement de ces idées d'égalité, défend de mépriser ouvertement des préjugés conservateurs. J'ai cru deviner, par tes lettres, une tendance marquée à t'exalter pour ces dogmes que tu nommes régénérateurs, mais qui ne peuvent l'être qu'après nous avoir tués. C'est ici le moment de te dire un mot des liaisons que le hasard pourrait te faire contracter avec des jeunes gens de couleur que des blancs envoient en Europe. Ne t'arrête pas aux signes extérieurs, ils sont souvent trompeurs. Sonde, questionne tous les créoles, tes camarades. Le nombre ne doit pas être grand ainsi sera-t-il plus facile de découvrir les origines et d'échapper à des dangereuses amitiés qui deviendraient une source de regrets et de contrariétés à venir, ne pouvant jouir d'une entière liberté dans vos rapports à votre retour dans les colonies. Quelle que soit l'énergie de ta volonté à cet égard, tu ne pourras lutter contre la société qui pèsera sur toi de tout le poids de ses usages et de ses idées incarnées. Songes-y, mon fils, et tout en accordant ta bienveillance, garde-toi de t'égaliser par des liens d'amitié à des compatriotes de couleur. Je n'en dis pas d'avantages; que ta raison t'éclaire".

Finally, let us turn again to the Spanish Caribbean, or to be more exact, to Eugenio María de Hostos, whom we have already mentioned. In the novel *La peregrinación de Bayoán*, just as in the speeches I have already quoted, the idea of a pan-Antillean confederation is fundamental. This idea is staged through a quest and odyssey that remains open to the end and is never clearly resolved. Thus, the protagonist sees himself as a constantly searching pilgrim in an in-between space: “I am a man wandering in a desert, and you are my only oasis [he is speaking to his home island]. I am a pilgrim. . . . Must I go on this pilgrimage? All right then, onward!” (Hostos 1988b: 18).²⁶

The pilgrimage here is a multidimensional quest; an expression of openness, but also of alienation; it is goal-directedness but also makes the journey into the goal; a circular structure that is broken in many places. Bayoán writes some of his journal entries on board ship, which is why it is called *Diario de a bordo* (logbook), with a reference to Columbus. Thus, the ship represents a sort of threshold space. It can also be seen as a vehicle that crosses temporal boundaries and transports the protagonist from one level to another—so that he is almost commuting between regions of time and of space: “The wind pushed the frigate, and the frigate moved the way that I move, pushed by a wind about which I still do not know whether it leads to port” (Hostos 1988b: 192).²⁷ The oscillation between the waves and also between open spaces relativizes the determinacy of a discourse of *Caribbeanidad*.

4. Conclusion

In an era in which it is first necessary to discuss who may even call themselves human beings in the first place, a conscious affirmation of the unpredictable potential inherent in every conviviality would be impossible. And yet, against the background of today’s discussions of conviviality, new ways of reading historical texts become possible. The examples have shown that cultural forms of representation of the nineteenth-century Caribbean offer an entire arsenal of norms of knowledge about conviviality: for example, Maynard de Queilhe’s utopian model of a slave society or the outline of a mixed-race society in the *Revue des Colonies*. Our focus on these constellations of conviviality has brought out a new productive dimension: the kinds of strenuous efforts that whites found it necessary to undertake in order to defend their whiteness.

Whereas ethnic differences before 1848 primarily reproduce binary structures—whether as a system of slavery that works very well for everyone involved, or as an early utopia of a melting pot—after 1848, the normative models change: especially in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, visions of a future pan-Caribbean confederation are

26 “Yo soy un hombre errante en un desierto, y mi único oasis eres tú. Yo soy un peregrino. . . . ¿Necesito peregrinar? Pues, ¡adelante!”.

27 “El viento empujaba a la fragata, y la fragata andaba como ando yo, empujado por un viento que aún no sé si lleva a puerto”.

developed. For all normative projections of conviviality, what remains crucial is that in spite of utopian constellations of relationality, the defining constructions of identity are essentialist.

But what about the various forms of knowledge about conviviality? They can be found more often in literary texts than in other genres. Conviviality often takes the shape of an uncertain testing ground (Ette 2010b: 989), of an exploration of boundaries, of an in-between that is much less capable of being clearly defined than in normative forms of cultural representation. Thus, it is no coincidence that in the context of an ideal of whiteness that only appears to be susceptible to a clear articulation, there is often a struggle over the definition of the mulatto: the indeterminability of the Other provokes fear. In addition, there is an expression of uncertainty and fear of losing the old privileges.

If we take a closer look at the topic of the “impossibility of the transfer of ideas”, it becomes clear how necessarily connected the norms and the forms of knowledge are to each other. This can be seen most clearly in Hostos, who formulates a pan-Antillean confederation as a normative ideal but in his novel, which appeared at the same time, depicts a quest for *Caribbeanidad* whose end is much more vaguely expressed than in his speeches. Even though nineteenth-century programmatic texts are unimaginable without the essentialisms they contain, the established frame of reference, including race and nation, is nevertheless relativized through the focus on forms of knowledge. Significantly, it is in the literary texts that a clear division between norms and forms of knowledge about conviviality is not always possible. Literature lives up to its role as an interactive storage medium for knowledge about conviviality (Ette 2007: 31). It is therefore not surprising that Hostos so clearly demonstrates this interwovenness of norms and of forms of knowledge about conviviality, given that he wrote so explicitly, in *Moral social*:

The novel, a genre that still has life in it because it still contains contrasts between what human society is and what it should be, can contribute to the completion of art, being true and being good. Then it will be an element of social morality. If it fulfills its responsibility, it will be. In the meantime, however, it is not, for this ultimate reason: because it is not fulfilling its responsibility (Hostos 1982: 248).²⁸

The discourses of *Caribbeanidad* can be understood as the precursors to today's conceptual debates over conviviality. Even though valuable approaches to thinking about knowledge about conviviality have come from the Caribbean, the concept has so

²⁸ “La novela, género que aún dispone de vida, porque aún dispone de contrastes entre lo que es y lo que debe ser la sociedad humana, puede contribuir a que el arte, siendo verdadero y siendo bueno, sea completo. Entonces será un elemento de moral social. Cumpla con su deber, y lo será. Mientras tanto, no lo es, entre otros, por ese motivo final: porque no cumple con su deber”.

far not been used in a defined way in current debates. After all, in January of 2009, during the agricultural crisis in Martinique and Guadeloupe an organization was founded with the Creole name *Lyannaj kont pwofitasyon* (LKP). *Lyannaj* means “conviviality”.²⁹ Thus it is not surprising that Glissant took this concept as an occasion to think about *vivre-ensemble* (conviviality): “Let us project our imaginaries into these high necessities until the strength of *Lyannaj*, or of conviviality, is no longer a ‘housewife’s basket’ but, instead, the plentifully amplified concern with the idea of the human” (Breleur et al. 2009).³⁰

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29 The general strike in Guadeloupe was carried out by a coalition of fifty organizations and movements; *Lyannaj kont pwofitasyon* (LKP) was the name of the strikers’ league: the process of become unified in battle recalls the act of love, and ‘Liane’ is the male sex. See Breleur et al. 2009.

30 “Projetons nos imaginaires dans ces hautes nécessités jusqu’à ce que la force du *Lyannaj* ou bien du *vivre-ensemble*, ne soit plus un ‘panier de ménagère’, mais le souci démultiplié d’une plénitude de l’idée de l’humain”.

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