

# Kriolu vs. Portuguese: Cape Verde's Linguistic Postcolonial Identity Crisis

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**Abstract:** A group of ten formerly uninhabited islands off the coast of Senegal, Cape Verde was established as a slave colony by the Portuguese in the 1500s and has been struggling to construct a cohesive cultural identity since winning independence from Portugal in 1975. That postcolonial struggle is, in many ways, a linguistic one. This article shows how Cape Verdeans confronted the language of their oppressors through the hybrid “forked tongue” of Kriolu, a “secret language” that subverted and resisted Portuguese in the struggle for independence in the twentieth century. However, because Cape Verdeans are primarily a hybrid people with a hybrid language, the island nation continues to experience a crisis of identity as it grapples with accepting or rejecting both its African and European roots.

*Keywords:* Cape Verde, Portuguese, postcolonialism, Africa, Creole

According to Abdul JanMohamed, every postcolonial nation attempts to define itself in order to “retrieve the value and dignity of a past insulted by European representation” (quoted in Parry 46). However, the unique problem faced by a nation like Cape Verde is that it can never fully recover its pre-colonial past because it does not have one. Cape Verdeans cannot disentangle a pre-colonial African identity from the direct influences of Portuguese colonialism because, as Fetson Kalua explains, “the colonizer and colonized are so very deeply implicated in one another that any discourse about origins smacks of paradoxes” (25). Consider the following Cape Verdean myth, which expresses this ambivalence of identity:

In the beginning, Cape Verde was part of the African continent. The Cape Verdeans were a rowdy bunch, though, always buying and selling stuff, always creating disorder and making noise wherever they went. They caused so much confusion that the rest of Africa got together and decided to separate Cape Verde from Africa by sending it far away, to the middle of the Ocean. But it wasn't long before the Cape Verdeans invented the ship and were out and about, causing a ruckus once again. The rest of Africa then decided to break Cape Verde into ten little pieces, in the hope of keeping them apart and quiet, but they readily found a way to get together and make noise again. It was then that the Africans did the worst thing they could possibly have done—they took the rain away from Cape Verde. From then on, Cape Verdeans have scattered throughout the world, taking noise and confusion everywhere they go. (Rego 157)

This origin myth, recorded by Marcia Rego during a conference on “Cape Verdean-ness” in Cape Verde's capital of Praia, Santiago, speaks of a people clamoring to recover a pre-colonial past in a postcolonial era. As Rego points out, Cape Verdeans in the myth identify themselves as “being of Africa, but not African, just as they are also of Portugal but hardly Portuguese” (157). The myth also shows the restlessness of the Cape Verdean people, “invented the ship and were out and about” after Africa tried to keep them isolated in the middle of the sea. Most tellingly, however, the “noise,” “ruckus,” and “confusion” mentioned in the myth speak to the disruptive, irreverent language of the Cape Verdeans, a Creole language derived from Portuguese and African tribal languages referred to as *Kriolu*.<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase Gloria Anzaldúa, Cape Verde's linguistic identity is “twin skin” to Cape Verde's ethnic identity (Anzaldúa 81).

Problematically, the hybridity of Cape Verde's language and ethnicity<sup>2</sup> complicates the cultural identity of Cape Verdean people as the nation debates whether it is more African or more European through its use of Kriolu or Portuguese. If ethnic identity and linguistic identity really are twin skins of each other, then inquiring into the Cape Verdean language dynamics also causes us to question the Manichean binary of Africanness and Europeaness within a culture that is so completely rooted in a more intricate and multifaceted hybridity: one which cannot be so easily defined.

### The Birth of Kriolu

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (214) asks, "How does a culture seeking to become independent imagine its own past?" Said uses the Ariel-Caliban polarity discussed in Cuban critic Robert Fernandez Retamar's "Caliban" to outline three choices faced by the colonized subject. The first choice is to do what Ariel does and become a "willing servant of Prospero"; the second is to do as Caliban does and accept his "mongrel past" while not rejecting the possibilities for "Future development"; and the third choice is to "be a Caliban who sheds his current servitude and physical disfigurements in the process of discovering his essential, pre-colonial self" (Retamar 214). The third option seems the most recuperative and empowering for the colonized subject. Still, it is not an option for the Cape Verdean people because their pre-colonial past pre-dates Cape Verde itself and is, consequently, irrecoverable. As the title of Clarence Walker's critique of Afrocentrism suggests, "We can't go home again." In other words, Afrocentrism is problematic for African peoples because it attempts to elide the consequences of centuries of colonial oppression. Walker asserts that "Rather than transcend the racialism of nineteenth-century Aryanism, Afrocentrism only repeats it" (Walker 16). Afrocentrism is particularly insufficient to envision the reconstruction of Cape Verdean identity because the island nation was only ever used as a slave outpost. Prior to the Portuguese enslavement of African people in Cape Verde, the islands were uninhabited. Further, in terms of language origins, Derek Pardue observes that "Cape Verdeans are unique in the history of European colonialism because their lingua franca was already a hybrid with Portuguese and a range of established African languages" (Pardue 17). However, unlike Caliban, who, according to Retamar, is forced to use the same language as his colonizer in order to "curse him, to wish that the 'red plague' would fall on him" (Retamar 14), Cape Verdeans have found subversive power in the formation of their own Creole language.

Frantz Fanon claims that "Every colonized people... finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country" (*Black Souls, White Masks* 18). In coming "face to face with the language of the civilizing nation," which in the case of Cape Verde is Portuguese, Cape Verdeans were able to create the hybrid "forked tongue" of Kriolu, a language that "sprang out," similar to the Chicano language Gloria Anzaldua writes about in *Borderlands*, of "the need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language" (Anzaldua 77).

The "secret language" of the Cape Verdeans arose out of a need for enslaved people from a wide range of African tribes who barely understood each other to establish a common language that subverted and resisted the language of their oppressors. Derived from Portuguese and mixed with various borrowings from West African languages, notably Mandingo and Senegambian (Williams 29), Kriolu became the unofficial language of the colonized in the early days of colonization and was eventually utilized as a cultural instrument for strategic essentialism in the struggle for independence in the twentieth century. In the beginning, however, Kriolu emerged organically and mirrored the hybrid ethnicity of its speakers.

The Portuguese discovered Cape Verde in the early 1500s and quickly established it as a colony for the "*ladinização*," or "Latinization" of African enslaved people, who were conditioned to intense labor and cultural indoctrination before being transported to the New World and other

overseas colonies. Because the Portuguese colonizers left their families at home, there were relatively few Portuguese women in the Cape Verde colony. As a result, Portuguese masters often fathered children with enslaved women. As Richard A. Lobban, author of *Cape Verde: Crioulo Colony*, notes, the bipolar system of “slavers and slaves lasted as little as nine months before it began to be ambiguous” (Lobban 54). By 1550, the mestizo population reached 69.61%, which outnumbered not only the Whites at 1.96% but the Blacks as well, at 28.38% (Lobban 55). In fact, the number of mestizo children grew so dramatically that in 1620 the monarchy gave the royal order to force the exile of Portuguese women convicts to Cape Verde in an effort to extinguish the mulatto race (55). However, the effort proved futile (Williams 21).

In contrast to countries such as South Africa and the United States, in which categories of race tend to be more sharply defined, the racial hierarchies in Cape Verde were much more complex (Lobban 56–57). The hybridity of the Cape Verdean people as a result of master/slave sexual relations allowed them to ambiguate and complicate the Manichean binary. As Homi Bhabha argues,

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridisation rather than the hegemonic command of colonial authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourse and enables a form of subversion founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (Bhabha 97)

However, the subversion of the colonial power through the ambivalence of hybridization occurred slowly and subtly in Cape Verde.

As early as 1546, the Portuguese allowed capable mulatto and even Black men to occupy administrative positions in the City Hall of Ribeira Grande, island of Santiago. However, it was not until the seventeenth century that the islands saw an increase in the participation of Blacks and mulattos in administrative positions. This was due in part to the miscegenation of the general population but also to a crisis in overseas trade, which forced many whites and their “legitimate” descendants to seek better opportunities in Europe. As a result, Blacks and mulattos were able to fill vacant public positions that would have otherwise been withheld from them. Whites also often left their lands to their illegitimate sons, which gave mulattos further opportunities for social ascendance (Rego 27). One of these illegitimate mulatto sons, Colonel Honorario Pereira Barreto (1813–1859), was the first Cape Verdean-born governor of Portuguese Guinea, indicating a strong Cape Verdean presence not only within the island nation but also on the African coast in the nineteenth century (Lobban 36). Colonel Barreto is an example of what would be known as a *lançado*, a hybrid ethnic category that

violated colonial law and mingled with the African natives, giving rise to the Cape Verdean version of the colonial system, in which the line between colonizer and colonized became increasingly blurred, slaves and slavers were often confounded, and the Portuguese language quickly gave way to Kriolu in everyday life. (Rego 35)

Thus, Kriolu emerged alongside the mulato and the *lançado* because, like both hybrid racial categories, Kriolu is a hybrid language that blurred the lines between the language of the colonizer (Portuguese) and that of the colonized (African tribal languages).

Not surprisingly, due to its ability to threaten the linguistic binary of colonizer and colonized, Kriolu was met with some hostility, not so much within the islands but from the Portuguese crown. Colonial inspector Lopes de Lima, in a report to Lisbon National Press in 1844 after an official visit to Cape Verde, was troubled by Kriolu and made the following statement:

The pure Portuguese Language... has been substituted by a mixed chatter of African terms and old Portuguese...; rapidly pronounced with guttural endings; without grammar or fixed rules; which they call *Lingua Creoula*... The same whites animate its use, learning the Creole as soon as they

arrive there from Europe... and teaching their children to speak it with virtual exclusion of clean Portuguese... It is a vice that can only be destroyed little by little, with the introduction of priests and schools of good Portuguese (Rego 40).

Lopes de Lima's assertion that Kriolu's "mixed chatter" was destroying the "pure" and "clean" Portuguese speaks to an endemic underlying racism and to the threat that both Kriolu and its mixed-race people posed to the Manichean binary that the Portuguese colonizers wanted to keep intact. That threat was, in fact, real since Kriolu would become an instrument in the hands of the Cape Verdean people to dismantle the binary in their struggle for independence from Portugal.

### Kriolu Resistance

The founding of a Cape Verdean journal titled *Claridade* in 1936, by Cape Verdean writers Jorge Barbosa, Baltasar Lopes, and Manuel Lopes, was the first important step toward establishing a robust Cape Verdean identity through socially oriented writing that "pertained to local themes—droughts, colonial negligence, inequalities between 'black' and 'white,' and hunger—and that envisioned the birth of a new Cape Verdean ethnos" (Rego 43). The *Claridade* movement contributed important ideas to the liberation movement that would continue into the 1960s and ultimately lead to the birth of the Cape Verdean Republic in 1975.

*Claridade* writers used various strategies to strengthen a unique national identity. On the one hand, they attempted to come to terms with their enslaved past and colonized present by rejecting and criticizing their colonial oppressors; however, they had to do this carefully and subtly so as not to enrage the Portuguese officials. Secondly, they embraced Kriolu as a national and cultural language by writing and publishing poems in Kriolu for the first time. According to Rego, literary critics have noted that Cape Verdean poets often wrote evasion-themed poetry in Portuguese, while counter-evasion poetry, which often expressed a "painful longing for home," or *sodadi*, was often written in Kriolu. An example of an evasion-themed poem by *Claridade* writer Luís Romano is included below, an excerpt from a poem titled "White Brother":

Your dead seeds were unable to bloom

So you mixed my Black blood  
into the dough of a land that you desired exclusively for yourself  
You engaged the arms that I gave you—White Brother—  
and extracted vast fortunes from the mud heaps where my eyes saw the light of day

Thus, day-by-day, you constructed as you destructed  
the tomb of your dreams  
hour by hour you inoculated in my veins  
the bitter bile that you would have to drink

Now all that is left to you is the sea—look upon it—  
In its immensity  
—perhaps—

You have the vision of a symbol that you tore down: union (Williams 225).

Originally written in Portuguese, this evasion-themed poem expresses anger towards the "White Brother," the Portuguese colonizer. The poet acknowledges the greed of his oppressor, who "extracted vast fortunes" in an attempt to build an empire, the forced miscegenation, the mixing of "Black blood / into the dough of a land you desired exclusively for yourself," and the exploitation of the "engaged arms that I gave you." However, despite the anger and resentment, the poet does not entirely reject the Portuguese oppressor because he acknowledges the ethnic ties to his "white brother." Inevitably, the poet has white blood in him as well, so the mixing of races inextricably binds the two brothers. That said, even though he credits the colonizer for his own creation, the poet does not call the colonizer his "father" because that would place the two

of them in a vertical hierarchy, with the poet in a subordinate position. Instead, he uses the term “brother” to create a horizontal relationship where both brothers share the same status.

Furthermore, despite the oppression and pain the poet experienced at the hands of his white brother, he finds a source of strength in his suffering. The “inoculation” put into his veins, which is the “bitter bile” the white brother is forced to drink, refers to the hybridity of the Cape Verdean. The colonizer’s illegitimate mulatto children not only complicate the Manichean binary, but their very existence forces their white fathers to drink the “bitter bile” by confronting the Freudian mirror of the Self, exposing the ugliness of colonization. Bhabha calls this confrontation a crisis of the authority’s system of recognition, in which “colonial specularity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid” (Bhabha 175).

An example of counter-evasion poetry is the Kriolu poem “Morna de Despedida” (Morna of Parting), written by Eugenio Tavares. Versions in Kriolu, Portuguese, and English are provided below:

Se bem é doce,	Se reunir é doce,	If meetings are sweet,
Bai é maguado;	Partir é magoa;	Then partings are sour;
Mas, se ca bado,	Mas, se não partir,	But, if one won’t leave,
Ca ta birado!	Não terá de voltar!	There’s no return hour!
Se no more	E se morremos	And if we should die
Na despedida,	Na despedida,	As we now depart,
Nhor Des na volta	O nosso Deus na volta	Then in God’s return
Ta dano bida.	Nos dará vida.	He’ll grant life and heart.

(Williams 186)

*Morna* is the most popular Cape Verdean genre of music and poetry that expresses longing and nostalgia for loved ones and home. In “Morna de Despedida,” the poet must part from his beloved, and though “partings are sour,” he knows that there must be a “return hour” when the lovers reunite. Though not explicitly stated, the return is not only to a loved one but to the poet’s beloved island home. The fact that this *morna* is written in Kriolu adds an extra dimension of *sodadi*, since Kriolu is a language of Cape Verdean pride that roots the speaker to the soil of the Archipelago. It also infuses the poem with a musicality that the Portuguese and English versions do not have. For example, there is more rhyme, with maguado/bado/birado and despedida/volta/bida. Also, Kriolu collapses pronouns and articles into one, such as “O nosso” into “Nhor,” and shortens words, such as “bai” instead of “partir” or “more” instead of “morremos,” which allows the Kriolu version a more consistent syllabic structure of four or five iambic syllables. As a result, the Kriolu poem sounds more like a song that can be performed off the page because Kriolu is primarily a spoken or sung language instead of a written one. Though the poem does not express overt anti-colonialist themes, the use of Kriolu and the *morna* tradition subtly establishes a sense of nationalism and cultural pride.

In the 1950s, a few decades after the *Claridade* movement began, revolutionary-minded intellectuals who thought of themselves as Africans formed groups to fight for independence from Portugal. They formed the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) in 1956, with Cape Verdean-Guinean Amílcar Cabral<sup>3</sup> as president (Williams 27). When Kriolu became a target of the Portuguese government and was banned from school grounds in 1959, Cabral and others adopted the hybrid language as a banner for the nationalist movement (Rego 45). In his famous speech to the PAIGC, Cabral argued that “if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture” (Lobban 61). Kriolu, then, became a tool for strategic essentialism since “The recuperation of the *badiu* ‘soul,’ or Cape Verde’s ‘African roots,’ was an important part of the PAIGC’s... campaign against colonial forces and their repression of Cape Verdean culture” (Rego 147). It

was incredibly effective as a source of political power, as “Cape Verdeanity,” which included Kriolu, “was counterposed to Portuguese culture as a means of asserting self-determination and achieving national liberation” (Lobban 146).

After fighting in the jungles of Guinea-Bissau, revolutionists finally won independence, which was declared from the Sheraton Hotel in Boston on February 23, 1975. On July 5, Cape Verde became officially recognized as independent from Portugal and joined Guinea-Bissau as a two-state country, which was later disbanded in 1981 (Williams 29). Despite the success of the liberation movement, however, the question of cultural identity remained, as Cape Verdeans were faced with the decision to identify as European or African. The hybrid culture, race, and language of the Cape Verdean people made this extremely difficult.

### Postcolonial Debate: African or European?

Fanon, writing about the Algerian War of Independence from France in the 1950s and early 1960s in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*, underscores a similar crisis of identity experienced by the Cape Verdean people after achieving independence:

African unity, a vague term, but nevertheless one to which the men and women of Africa were passionately attached and whose operative function was to put incredible pressure on colonialism, reveals its true face and crumbles into regionalisms within the same national reality. Because it is obsessed with its immediate interests, because it cannot see further than the end of its nose, the national bourgeoisie proves incapable of achieving simple national unity and incapable of building the nation on a solid, constructive foundation. The national front that drove back colonialism falls apart and licks its wounds. (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 106)

As Fanon suggests, the vagueness of “Africa” is not concrete enough to build a united culture. Although Cape Verdeans used Kriolu and emphasized their Africanness to distance themselves from the Europeanness of the Portuguese, they did not actually see themselves as purely African either. However, instead of coming to terms with the hybridity of their history and language, the postcolonial era in Cape Verde is reflected by a bipolar debate between Africanness and Europeanness.

A telling example of Cape Verde's struggle to define itself as either African or European in the postcolonial era is the debate surrounding the national flag. The first Cape Verdean flag was created in 1975 by the PAIGC, the reigning political party, immediately following independence, and it clearly emphasized Cape Verde's African roots (see Figure 1). Its primary colors were green, red, and yellow, colors often associated with African vexillology. In addition, its emblem included corn cobs, a decidedly African image. In the early 1990s, an opposing political party, the MpD (Movement for Democracy), rejected the “symbolic ties to an impoverished and undemocratic Africa” (Lobban 148) and instead incorporated primary colors of red, white, and blue, with stripes along the center and ten stars representing the ten islands (see Figure 2).



Fig 1. The Cape Verde Flag, 1975–1992. Retrieved from [www.fotw.info/flags/cv\\_1975.html](http://www.fotw.info/flags/cv_1975.html).



Fig 2. The Cape Verde Flag, 1992 – present. Retrieved from Wikipedia (Flag of Cape Verde)



Although the debate surrounding the Cape Verdean national flag appears to have been settled, the debate around the officialization of Kriolu continues until this day and reflects the same underlying tensions of racial identity between European and African roots.

In the constitutional revision of 1999, the debate over the officialization of Kriolu was divided among party lines. The center-right MpD party proposed that the government work towards the eventual officialization of Kriolu, while the opposing center-left political party, the PAICV (African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde), advocated for its immediate officialization, without any “hierarchical subalternation” to Portuguese (Rego 53). Ultimately, the MpD prevailed. The current constitutional amendment reads:

1. The official language is Portuguese.
2. The State promotes the conditions for the officialization of the Cape Verdean mother tongue, in parity with the Portuguese language. (Rego 53)

As this linguistic amendment shows, the tensions between both languages continue to erupt in various points of conflict, creating a dual personality within Cape Verdean linguistic identity.

### Dual Linguistic Identity

It is important here to distinguish the differences between Kriolu and Portuguese in order to show how a dual linguistic identity emerges from the tension between both languages. Marcia Rego explains the difference between the two when she writes,

On one hand, Kriolu, inalienable from the language of the colonizer, is held to be their ‘own,’ the only way to convey what it really means to be caboverdiano. On the other hand, Portuguese is the language of a literary and political elite who effectively imagined the nation and declared it independent. (Rego 48).

Gabriel Mariano, a Cape Verdean writer, characterizes the differences in less formal terms: “Portuguese is the language of solemn moments, of saloons and cutaway coats, Kriolu is the language of the day-to-day, and of the kitchen, and the language one uses while in short-sleeved shirts” (Rego 85). Due to the divide between the use of both languages, deciding whether to use Portuguese or Kriolu in various social settings is a complicated political decision. A Cape Verdean from Praia named José Antonio recounts this difficulty in the workplace:

Nowadays, it’s much more common to speak Kriolu at work, even in state institutions. But there are some implicit rules, you know. If you speak to someone in Kriolu, you’re putting yourself in a place of equal status... You may have a college education and the other person might be illiterate, you know; if you speak Kriolu you are equal. So, you usually don’t speak Kriolu to your boss unless you are close, or unless he talks to you in Kriolu first. Now, if you want to introduce a barrier, then you speak in Portuguese... Automatically, it creates a barrier. (Rego 90)

The fact that Portuguese creates a “barrier” indicates that the vertical hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized persists, even today, within the linguistic hierarchy of Portuguese and Kriolu. Despite the hybridity of the Cape Verdean people both ethnically and linguistically, the language of the colonizer, which is still the official language of the island nation, allows a Manichean binary to exist on a subtle yet pervasive level. This results in a continued crisis of identity, where Cape Verdeans are forced to choose to identify as African or European depending on the social situation and the political advantage (or disadvantage) of either marker.

The case of names sheds further light on this identity crisis. In Cape Verde, most everyone has a *nome de igreja* (church name) and a *nome de casa* (house name), sometimes called a *nominho* (nickname). The *nomes de igreja* are almost always in Portuguese (some examples include Maria dos Santos, Jose Ramos, Manuel Ferreira, and Carla Lopes), while the *nomes de casa* are always in Kriolu (some examples include Djon-Djon, Titi, and Zê). Cape Verdeans rarely call each other

by their *nomes de igreja* unless they operate in an official capacity at church or a government institution. A newspaper obituary further demonstrates this dual identity of names: “Nhonho, Tchico, Guguta, Da, Djosa, and Cocioa invite the friends and family of Francisco Gomes Mendes, who was better known as Tatai, to the mass in his honor, on the third month of his death, to be celebrated in the Chapel of...” (Rego 103). Because death is an official and important event, the *nome de igreja* of the deceased man is used in the newspaper; however, because none of his friends and family knew him by his *nome de igreja*, the obituary lists his *nome de casa* as well as those of his family members.

Perhaps the most destructive result of the tension between Portuguese and Kriolu is the racist hierarchy that persists even between Kriolu dialects. There are two main Kriolu dialects, Sotavento and Barlavento. Sotavento is the dialect of the southern islands and is most widely spoken. It is also considered the “original” Kriolu because other dialects are derived from it. Speakers of Sotavento Kriolu criticize the lighter-skinned *sampadjudos*, the speakers of the northern Barlavento dialect, for thinking their dialect is superior because it is closer to Portuguese. The *sampadjudos*, on the other hand, disparage the *badius* for speaking an African Kriolu. In both cases, the tension is based on racial discrimination, where one group derides the other for attempting to be more European, while the second group mocks the other for being too African (Rego 57).

The bipolar identity crisis between European and African influences permeates all levels of Cape Verdean linguistic culture: the political choice of speaking Portuguese or Kriolu, the use of *nomes de igreja* and *nomes de casa*, and even the Kriolu dialects themselves. The result is no doubt a structure of racial and cultural discrimination inherited from colonial indoctrination.

### Hybrid Kriolu Culture

Although there is no easy solution to the cultural and linguistic identity crisis Cape Verdeans currently experience, the more Cape Verdeans acknowledge the hybridity of their culture, the less a vertical colonial hierarchy will be allowed to pervade all levels of Cape Verde's complex linguistic structure. Although Cape Verdeans are often forced to choose between speaking and writing in Portuguese or Kriolu for various political reasons, even the relationship between the two languages is not necessarily binary in nature.

Marcia Rego points out that Kriolu and Portuguese are not “discrete codes” that Cape Verdeans can easily switch in and out of, but two intertwining and entangled languages that together represent the hybrid and complex history of Cape Verdean culture. Both languages feed off each other in complicated ways (Rego 1). Where “One speaks a Portuguese disturbed by, contested by, rescued by, and completed by Kriolu,” they may also speak a “Kriolu that is haunted, moderated, or instigated by Portuguese... This nuanced linguistic interplay is a legacy of Cape Verde's role in the slave economy, of the intimate exchanges that sidestepped the colonial discourse and the hierarchies they engendered” (1). Is there, then, to paraphrase the question Josias Tembo poses in *African Identity*, another way of conceptualizing Cape Verdean identity that does not fall back into “polarities of essentialism and anti-essentialism?” (Tembo 20).

Tembo outlines the theoretical foundations of African identity, which he argues all fall short of reconstructing an African identity without defining it merely in opposition to Eurocentrism. The first view is the particularist trend, “which informs the essentialist view on African identity” (Tembo 19). The second is the universalist trend, which “informs the anti-essentialist view” (19). The last of the three dominant theories of African identity is “the African hermeneutical trend, which takes the middle ground between the particularist and the universalist trends” (20). Tembo's critique of these postcolonialist theories is that they take “for granted that identities are fluid, that subjects are constructed through competing discourses, and that cultures are never homogenous” (43). Borrowing from the work of David Scott, Tembo adds a fourth view,



which “calls for a critical and comprehensive understanding of the present,” for “To come to such an understanding of the present, an engagement with the past is imperative” (45).

By adopting Tembo’s fourth view of African identity as a historically constructed and fluid identity comprising competing discourses, we will come to a better understanding of the Cape Verdean culture of the present. The dual personality crisis that revolves around a bipolar debate between Africanness and Europeanness will also be eased because Cape Verdeans are both African and European. Kalua observes that for “many people, a true and pure African identity is not only possible but realizable, even in today’s globalized and globalizing world,” but “invoking the term ‘Africa’ suggests a fixity of identity or cultural unity, and yet the underlying motif remains the opposite: the shifting nature of African identity” (25–26). A constructivist approach to Cape Verdean identity—in contrast to the deconstructive approaches of essentialism or anti-essentialism—acknowledges this fluidity in the ever-changing globalization of the present. Cape Verdeans are not defined solely by geography, as more Cape Verdeans now live outside of the country than in it (Lobban et al.), but by their shared language, which has always been a hybrid “forked tongue.” But this does not mean that Cape Verdeans are powerless or dominated by their colonial past. Despite Fanon’s claim that “colonised persons who speak the language of the coloniser are ipso facto assuming the latter’s culture” and are summarily dominated by it (quoted in Montle 96), Kriolu’s hybridity allows for liberation and subversion of the colonial tongue of Portuguese. An example of this is the Creole rap culture in Portugal. Through his ethnographic fieldwork in Portugal, Derek Pardue uncovered a unique Cape Verdean language identity and began to see the “story of Kriolu... as a Creole interruption and thus, a contingent break from the mimesis of Portugal’s ‘soft’ power of inclusion” (Pardue 2). In addition, Kriolu has recently received recognition as a legitimate language with the publication of Manuel Da Luz Goncalves’ *Mili Mila*, the first Cape Verdean Creole-English dictionary (Miller), and the US publication of the first children’s book in Kriolu, *Tiaçu y Vovo*, by Djofa Tavares (Daniel). More work needs to be done, but Kriolu is finally becoming accepted as a language in its own right, and more importantly, it has emerged as the predominant way of expressing Cape Verdean identity in an increasingly globalized age.

The following poem by Jorge Barbosa, one of the founders of the *Claridade* movement, is an origin myth titled “Prelude.” Similar to the myth at the beginning of this essay, the poem attempts to come to terms with Cape Verde’s complicated pre-colonial past. However, Barbosa does not endeavor to *recover* a pre-colonial African or European past. Instead, he gives us the historical reality of Cape Verde’s true origins:

When the discoverer arrived at the first island  
neither naked men  
nor naked women  
were peeking out  
in innocence and fear  
behind the vegetation.

Nor were there poison arrows flying through the air  
nor shouts of alarm and War  
echoing through the hills.

There were only birds of prey  
    With sharp talons  
sea birds  
    Of extended flights  
and song birds  
    Whistling their never before heard melodies.

And the vegetation whose seeds arrived stuck  
to the wings of birds  
swept this way  
by the fury of the storms.

When the discoverer arrived  
and jumped out of the longboat beached on the shore  
sinking  
his right foot into the wet sand

And making the sign of the cross  
still unsure and somewhat surprised  
and acting on behalf of his King  
well it was at that moment  
that very first moment  
when this our destiny which  
belongs to us all began to be fulfilled. (Williams 277)

As Barbosa beautifully illustrates, the “destiny” that belongs to all Cape Verdeans began when the first Portuguese colonizer set foot on Cape Verde’s soil. The islands were completely uninhabited, so “neither naked men / nor naked women / were peeking out / in innocence and fear / behind the vegetation.” Therefore, there is no hope of recovering a pre-colonial past because Cape Verde does not have one: its past is inseparably entangled, for better or worse, with Portuguese colonialism. However, as Cape Verde’s hybrid ethnic and linguistic identity became a powerful political tool throughout its history, perhaps Cape Verde can once again embrace the tension that gave rise to the complexity of its hybrid Kriolu identity: a culture that is not solely African or European, but uniquely Cape Verdean.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Derek Pardue explains that there are two spellings of this word, marking a “general break between the Creole spoken in the northern ring of islands called the *barlavento*, or windward islands (Crioulo), and the southern, *sotavento*, or leeward islands (Kriolu)” (9). For simplicity, I use “Kriolu” throughout this article to refer to both Creoles spoken in Cape Verde.
- <sup>2</sup> “The overwhelming majority of the population of Cabo Verde is of mixed European and African descent and is often referred to as *mestiço* or Crioulo. There is also an African minority, which includes the Fulani (Fulbe), the Balante, and the Mandyako peoples. A small population of European origin includes those of Portuguese descent (especially from the Algarve, a historical province, and the Azores islands), as well as those of Italian, French, and English descent. There is also a substantial number that traces its roots to Sephardic Jews who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th and 16th centuries during the Inquisition and were among the islands’ early settlers, or to other groups of Jews—mainly tradesmen—who arrived in the 19th century from Morocco” (Lobban et al.).
- <sup>3</sup> Comparing Cabral’s often violent and militaristic speeches to the similar rhetoric of Franz Fanon, Edward Said argued for a wider and more generous view of both anti-colonial leaders: “It is hard to miss in Amílcar Cabral’s remarkable speeches and tracts the extraordinary intensity of the man’s mobilizing force, his animosity and violence, the way resentment and hate keep turning up—all the more evident against the particularly ugly backdrop of Portuguese colonialism. Yet one would seriously misread him if one missed Cabral’s enabling utopianism and theoretical generosity, just as it is a misreading of Fanon not to see in him something considerably beyond a celebration of violent conflict. For both Cabral and Fanon, the emphasis on armed struggle is tactical” (Said 275).

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