Larson, Pier M.: *Ocean of Letters. Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009. ISBN: 978-0-521-73957-3; 378 S.

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This book is an important contribution to the growing literature on Creolization studies which seeks to clarify the ways in which cultural mixing occurs. From now on, it will be impossible to ignore Pier M. Larson's exploration of the role of slavery, emancipation, oceanic travel, Christian missions, and colonial linguistics in the processes of creolization.

With this excellent, well-argued and well-written study, Larson intervenes in the field with a focus on the ways in which processes of creolization have emerged and developed in Indian Ocean European colonies – French, British and Dutch. He looks at French and Malagasy archives, his knowledge of Malagasy language proves fundamental. This shows the importance of learning the languages of the region one is studying, especially when one wishes to study Creolization in a region as diverse as the Indian Ocean. Larson also demonstrates a good knowledge of local and regional scholarship

The debate around creolization, whether the notion or the process and the practices of creolization, have long been associated with the Caribbean and the world of the plantation. Borrowed from linguistics, creolization has been extended to describe the cultural expressions in contact-zones. After much debate about the ways in which 'creoles' as a type of language emerged, linguist reached a consensus: 'creoles' were languages that emerged when pidgins –contact languages facilitating trade between Europeans and locals – became mother tongues for the majority of the populations. In *Le Discours antillais* (*Caribbean Discourse*) poet and writer Edouard Glissant wrote that creolization requires that „heterogeneous elements that are put into contact valorize each other, that there is not degradation or diminishing of the being, in the contact and mixing."[1]. Since no one has been spared creolization, no one can assert 'purity' of origins as a pretext for domination. (ibid) Creolization was possible in the Caribbean because it „has always been a place of encounter, of complicity, a preface to the American continent."(ibid). Glissant later generalized the Caribbean experience of creolization as a globally occurring process, characterized by unpredictability and opacity, diffraction and transversality. The argument ran as thus: Creolization was the unexpected, unpredictable consequence of colonial slave trade and slavery. Slavery encouraged the breaking of social ties and loyalties. Hence, the creation of a new world with new languages, beliefs, and practices. All cultures absorbed influences from other cultures.

Sidney Mintz warned against applying a notion 'from a geographically and chronologically specific New World setting, without serious attention to what the term meant, or to what historically specific processes it stood for.' Today's globalization does not bear comparison with the Caribbean where, 'people ... subject to the original processes of creolization were – among other things, and with their children – manacled for life'.[2]

In postcolonial writings, creolization is often used in concatenation with 'syncretism', 'hybridity' or 'mixture,' making it a „buzzword" that lacks clarity, that allows abstract intellectual rides on a metaphor without actually bringing more understanding on how creolization occurs. This is why reading Larson's book can be such a pleasure. He brings a new angle to the debate. By looking at creolization in the Indian Ocean, he demonstrates that research in this region has marginalized the agency of the Afro-Malagasy diaspora. Rather than seeking total integration in the societies of their forced migration, Afro-Malagasy slaves continued to identify with their origins and to speak their language. He writes that the current focus on 'cultural and linguistic hybridity has marginalized enslaved persons' ancestral languages from colonial history' (p. 19). Thus, „créolité-as-

[1] Édouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays, Charlottesville 21989, p. 140 and 561, see also: Ulf Hannerz, The World in Creolisation, in: Africa 57 (1987), pp. 546-559

[2] Sidney Mintz, The Socio-Historical Background to Pidginization and Creolization, in: D. Hymes (ed.), Pidginization and Creolization of Languages, London 1971 pp. 481-496.

hybridity“ will tend to reach conclusion that seem adverse to postcolonial thinking since „it typically takes as its chief interest the history of European creoles and seeming evidence of early subaltern monolinguism in the official archive“ (p. 352).

This is an important claim that challenges the blueprints on creolization. Combining compelling details with a wide knowledge of theory of creolization, Larson looks at letters exchanged between enslaved Malagasy and their families at home and at archives of trial where Malagasy slaves spoke in their language. He shows that contrary to what has been taken for granted (creolization as loss of vernacular languages), Malagasy was widely spoken in the streets, prisons, tribunals and plantations of the European colonies, as well as in the correspondences and texts circulating in the Indian Ocean. Larson explores the various ways in which Creole myth making „badly distorts Afro-Malagasy-Creole history in the islands“ either by fixing Malagasy figures in the image of the „romantic and dangerous hypermasculine Malagasy leader of maroons“ (p. 209) or by ignoring that Malagasy was the primary language of communication, not French creole (p. 230).

In his first chapter, Larson introduces us to the extraordinary correspondence addressed in 1847, in her mother tongue by Mary Rafaravavy, a Malagasy woman residing in Mauritius, to her sovereign, Queen Ranavalona. This shows, he argues, that Malagasy language lingered „well pas a time most scholars assume ex-slaves and other Malagasy travelers were thoroughly creolized or monolingual in the colonial languages of their places of exile.“ (p. 8) In the successive chapters, Larson continues to take us through different examples to prove his case. The „epistolary conversation“ that the author unveils supports his argument that there were „no standard trajectories for ancestral languages and identities,“ an argument he suggests can be applied to diasporas in other oceans.

Ocean of Letters complicate current understandings of processes of creolization and raises important questions about slavery, languages, and diasporas. It should be recommended readings for all those interested in the vernacular and identity formation.

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