Michael R. Paradiso-Michau, ed.

CREOLIZING FRANKENSTEIN

(Rowman and Littlefield, 2025) x + 403 pp.

Reviewed by Kir Kuiken on 2024-08-29

Creolizing Frankenstein is part of a series published in partnership with the Caribbean Philosophical Association that revisits political theorists and other canonical texts through the lens of "creolization." This term takes on a range of meanings and applications in the seventeen essays collected here. For some, it designates the way *Frankenstein* incorporates various discourses (medical, scientific, and political) into its structure or plot, thereby engaging with important questions (decolonization, abolition, and others) that arose during and after the period in which the novel was written. Elsewhere in the collection, "creolization" describes how a large number of cultural productions (films, television programs, other works of literature) have expanded the novel's themes into the present. Given its Caribbean origins, however, the term "creolization" also means the way the novel was (or was not) engaged with the decolonial

struggles of the Romantic period specific to the Caribbean—particularly the Haitian Revolution of 1804, the first successful slave revolt in history. With this many possible applications of the term, the volume risks taking on the monstrous form of Victor Frankenstein's "creolized" Creature: an accumulation of different elements without a coherent frame.

But that is precisely the point, since the collection's organizing concept—creolization—entails a hybridized production of something new. And like Frankenstein's creature, the book yields a surprising and inventive range of interpretive possibilities. Some of these—the way the novel formulates a discourse on race, for instance—have been dealt with before, but many of the essays update these approaches by resituating these approaches within recent debates and events, thereby suggesting how the novel continues to have relevance. To that effect, Elizabeth Young's opening essay expands on her *Black Frankenstein* (2008) by discussing recent Afrofuturist appropriations of the Creature. Lewis Gordon's "Gender, Race and Frankenstein's Creature" engages with films such as *Splice* (2009) and *Ex Machina* (2014), which have re-imagined the novel's intertwining of myth and science for the present. Emily Datskou's essay reads the Creature alongside a Danish artist's life narrative (*Man into Woman*, 1933) about her transition from Einar Wegener into Lili Elbe. Both works, Datskou argues, leave vague the scientific and technical details of their respective "creation" scenes—not out of necessity or discretion, but to "shift the reader's focus from the physical creation of the subject's bodies to their social and psychological construction" (51), thereby highlighting the performative dimension of gender.

However, because of the many topics that can be explored under the banner of "creolization," there is a kind of cumulative dimension to the volume that could have been addressed more clearly in the introduction. While the essays are grouped by topic, they sometimes reiterate approaches or questions. For instance, the work of Frantz Fanon frames

several of the essays, including “Revolutionary Responsibility” by Jane Anna Gordon and Elizabeth Jennerwein, and David McNally’s “You Call These Men a Mob.” Nevertheless, the book breaks new ground, particularly when it turns to *Frankenstein*’s socio-political context—specifically its relation to the Caribbean, from which its “creolizing” concept originates. The third section, titled “Literature, Theory and Culture,” follows on Sarah Juliet Lauro’s argument in *The Transatlantic Zombie* (2015), which connects *Frankenstein* to the Haitian Revolution. Persephone Braham’s “Galvanic Awakenings” examines how Hispanophone writers of the Caribbean in the nineteenth century and beyond engaged with different elements of Shelley’s novel. Focusing initially on Cuban novelists, Braham shows how Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiography of a Slave* (1840) and Gertrude Gómez de Avellanda’s *Sab* (1841) utilized the Creature’s abjection to articulate the status of slaves and former slaves in the Caribbean; here, slavery had been abolished in some places while it was retained or tolerated in others. Comparisons among the “Promethean” characters of all three novels are necessarily broad but often productive. The essay’s strongest claim concerns the relevance of these tropes to Caribbean literature and culture well into the twenty-first century. Dominican writer Rita Indiana’s novel *Tentacle* (2018), for instance, creolizes *Frankenstein* by explicitly connecting it to questions of climate change, queer politics, and colonialism, fleshing out for the current moment what Shelley may have only anticipated.

Lindsey Smith’s “Monstrous Hybridity” discusses Maryse Condé’s novel *Who Slashed Celanire’s Throat?* (2004), set in present-day Guadeloupe and Peru. Its main character, Jean Pinceau, reads *Frankenstein* and sets about to continue Victor’s work. He rescues an abandoned infant, Celanire, presumed dead after an attempted human sacrifice, whom he resuscitates and who develops into a grown woman under his care. Smith makes the case that both novels depict

a “monstrous hybridity”—a counterpoint to creolization that, while it tends to be treated in less positive terms, articulates something that can only be given expression through what is deemed unacceptable. The essay thereby suggests how presumed monstrosity takes many forms, some of which are not initially recognized as a welcomed form of hybridity. Smith provocatively suggests that the trope of “monstrous hybridity” widens the scope of the concept of creolization to include a narrative hybridity that results “in the recognition of voices and perspectives that were absent in previous iterations” (310).

While the remaining essays of the third section don’t directly address Caribbean literature, they productively situate *Frankenstein* in relation to more contemporary works. Thomas Meagher argues that Victor represents what Edmund Husserl called the “crisis” of the European sciences, and thus of “European Man.” That crisis is defined by a tension in modernity between, on the one hand, “anonymous” commitments to the universality of reason; and, on the other, the “nominious,” Meagher’s term for the appropriation of reason under one’s own name and in the name of Europe. Victor thereby becomes emblematic of modernity itself; the solution to this crisis, for both Shelley and Husserl, is a modernity that no longer views itself as uniquely represented by Western Europe.

Corey McCall and Borna Radnik engage in similar conceptual work by applying James Martel’s concept of “mis-interpellation” to the novel. Althusser argues that ideology functions through the interpellation or transformation of individuals into subjects of an ideological regime that, by addressing them, draws them into its constructions of normative behavior. Misinterpellation designates the subject’s subversion, from within, of the ideology into which they have been interpellated. According to McCall and Radnik, the Creature heeds the interpellative call to become a liberal subject in the hope of being granted rights on the basis of

his “rationality,” despite the fact that he is constantly excluded from the category of the human into which he has been interpellated. He goes on to undermine the interpellative ideology of humanism, collapsing the normative structures that have subjectivized him. Fanon expresses concern in *The Wretched of the Earth* that such subversions sometimes have a reactionary dimension. The authors similarly conclude that, while it *may* be revolutionary to reinscribe aspects of dominant ideologies in novel ways, it may also “reiterate these dominant ideologies, even among individuals and groups who were not meant to heed the interpellative call in the first place” (386). This argument challenges readings of the Creature as a figure of pure and simple resistance to power.

Perhaps no essay better exemplifies the title concept of the collection than Paul Youngquist’s brilliant “Funking with Victor.” Youngquist treats creolization not as a philosophical or political concept, but as an aesthetic term that redefines the essay form itself. His hybrid Afro-futurist narrative imagines the discovery of *Frankenstein* after the collapse of Western imperial culture, when “a new order arises in Africa, its cultural and spiritual traditions pieced together in part from the detritus of the fallen West” (125). Referencing George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic’s “The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein,” Youngquist mixes genres and forms to examine how a future might creolize Shelley’s novel in its own way. He thereby exemplifies what most of the essays in *Creolizing Frankenstein* argue: that ostensibly anachronistic readings of a work can reveal unexamined and vital aspects of both the past and the present.

One of the main strengths of the collection is that its contributors come from various disciplines and career stages, many of the most inventive essays are by younger scholars. It is a volume true to its word, employing a range of creolized devices to proliferate new readings of a

canonical novel. A key to its originality is that it explores of how Frankenstein, and *Frankenstein*, continue to resonate and be re-interpreted through the present. It thus constitutes a welcome expansion of ongoing debates about the novel into Caribbean Studies and other new territory.

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