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## **Kriola Culture of Mobility: Towards a New Research Paradigm**

**By Janine de Novais**

### **ABSTRACT**

Inspired by the display of ingenuity and resilience at the 2018 Poderoza Conference for Cabo Verdean women, this theoretical essay calls for research that takes up a *Kriola culture of mobility (KCM)*. Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) define a minority culture of mobility as “a set of cultural elements that is associated with a minority group, and that provides strategies for managing economic mobility in the context of discrimination and group disadvantage.” After Neckerman and colleagues, I argue that KCM research can explore and clarify the intersectional and multi-cultural dynamics that attend the sociocultural mobility that Cabo Verdean women in the US achieve. Further, I suggest that the particularities of KCM have universal resonance for any democracy like the US, where an increasing number of younger people are people of color, who are multicultural and are raised in households headed by women.

In March 2018, on the campus of Providence College, women of Cabo Verdean origin or ancestry, who make their homes in the United States and Europe, gathered for the second annual *Poderoza*<sup>1</sup> Conference. Conceived by scholar-activists Terza Lima-Neves and Aminah Pilgrim, the conference is a multidisciplinary and multipurpose gathering of women who come together to discuss issues that affect their lives. I was thrilled to be in one room with so many of us; gatherings like that always feel like a kind of homecoming. While our numbers in the United States are small relative to other immigrants of color, our community in Massachusetts and Rhode Island is large. The *Poderoza* conference was therefore an extraordinarily joyful and boisterous gathering of women, diverse in ages, experiences, Cabo Verdean islands of origin, hair styles, and preferred ways to spell the word Kriola.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cabo Verdean word that means, “powerful woman.”

<sup>2</sup> Kriola, meaning Cabo Verdean woman. I spell it Kriola with a K, consistent with the *Unified Alphabet for the Writing of Cabo Verdean (ALUPEC)*, but other forms include criola and crioula, which mimics Portuguese orthography.

Women spoke about about life back home and about life in the US. They spoke about domestic violence, gun violence, and sexual abuse. Women spoke about education, entrepreneurship, and political participation. One of my co-presenters was a political scientist living in London. Two of the attendees told me they had come all the way from Sweden, where the Cabo Verdean community was hoping to host the next Poderosa conference. I was taken by the different but consistent ways the women spoke about making a way, about bringing their community along, about moving across careers, across towns and across dreams. At the core of all stories, was what we would call “*xpedient*” in my native island of São Vicente—the know-how. In the audience, there was a recognition of this quality: heads nods, spontaneous applause, and audible *hmmms* and *uh-huhs*. This is not unique to us, of course. People of color in this country and everywhere, native born or immigrant, have long developed the know how to survive in social contexts that conspire to make it nearly impossible.

I thought specifically about my aunt Cristalina Pereira, who left Cabo Verde as a teenager to work as a domestic in Paris, as so many young women did. In the Cabo Verdean way, her journey took her where the opportunities were, and she eventually came to the United States, already as a middle-class professional. Tia Crista, as I call her, retired a few years ago from Brockton Public Schools, in Massachusetts. She was one of the first “community liaisons” at the schools. Her job, on paper, was to connect the school personnel with the Cabo Verdean community, primarily through translation. As she practiced it however, her role was much broader. She was a bridge between our folks and their new host country, a well of wisdom and empathy and *xpedient*. Beyond translating school communications and making home visits on behalf of teachers, Tia Crista offered parents leads on getting jobs, shared the name of affordable lawyers or

dentists, gave rides when it was too cold for the bus, and taught on-demand lessons on civic education—where to register to vote, where to get social services, where to complain at City Hall. She guided struggling families to housing, clothing and food. Thinking about all the women in my own life and listening to all the women at the conference, I was reminded that while my Tia Crista is a truly extraordinary human being, her practices are not unique to her. I was inspired to better understand, through research, what I call a **Kriola culture of mobility**.

### **Background**

According to the US State Department, the number of Cabo Verdeans living in the United States “almost rivals the islands’ current population of over 540,000.”<sup>3</sup> A seafaring people long before they were an independent African nation, Cabo Verdeans began coming to work and live in the US in the mid 18th century, at the height of the whaling industry. The first US consulate in sub-Saharan Africa opened in Cabo Verde in 1818. Cycles of famine and economic depression at home have forced consecutive generations of Cabo Verdeans to immigrate. The population of Cabo Verdean immigrants in the United States is the largest worldwide but smaller Cabo Verdean immigrant communities exist all over the world.

Given the small size of the population in the US relative to other immigrant communities, research on Cabo Verdeans in the US has been limited. Most prominent in this research has been the consistent engagement, spurred by Macedo and others, with the sociolinguistic and political implications of Cabo Verdean language and culture (Macedo, 1983; 2003). Important historical work has also focused on the historical bridge between the founding of the Cabo Verdean colony in the 1400s and the anti-colonial liberation struggle of the middle of the 20th century (Lobban, 2018). The research focused on the sociocultural practices of Cabo Verdean immigrants has

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2835.htm>

mostly addressed the challenges faced by Cabo Verdean urban youth (Azrael & Hemenway, 2011; Christiansen, 2010). Given that Cabo Verdean immigration to the US is majority female, and is spurred by working women of color who, consistent with US national trends, most often end up as single head of households, it is imperative to engage in research that seeks out and elevates their particular voices and perspectives. While Kriolas in the US live and work at the intersection of racial, gender and language discrimination, they also construct practices for thriving and progressing under those pressures. We need a new research paradigm to capture those practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) put forth the concept of “minority culture of mobility” to broaden our understanding of the experience of immigrants of color in the US. They define it as “a set of cultural elements that is associated with a minority group, and that provides strategies for managing economic mobility in the context of discrimination and group disadvantage.” Specifically, it pertains the challenges that minorities face over the longer term, as partial assimilation and social mobility takes place. These are strategies that minority middle classes (or minorities who are upwardly mobile) use to balance their culture of origin with the demands of the mainstream white culture. These are often, in part, strategies for negotiating and coping with the stresses that this cultural straddling demands. Until this important intervention, theories of immigrant assimilation in the US, specifically segmented assimilation theory, had a rather reductive (and pessimistic) view of the role of native minorities, especially African Americans, in the pathways of immigrants of color. Put forth by Portes and Zhou (1993), segmented assimilation theory argued that immigrants arriving after 1965, who were primarily people of color, would face “segmented” pathways to assimilation, given America’s racial hierarchy. Immigrants of color

would have only two options: “assimilation into the [racial and economic] underclass” or “economic advancement with preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity” (1993, p. 82). In other words, immigrants of color could integrate into Black and Latinx communities and find themselves at the bottom socioeconomic rung of society, or they could advance economically by adopting white dominant norms, while holding on to aspects of their culture.

While the theory correctly identifies how racism influences immigrant trajectories post 1965, it wholly ignored the existence of middle class people of color, including African Americans, with longstanding practices that balance sociocultural mobility with cultural identity and autonomy. Neckerman, Carter and Lee’s theory of minority culture of mobility centers the complexity and ingenuity of communities of color, both native and immigrant, and the existence of upwardly mobile classes among them. The authors argue people of color, especially African Americans, have long had strategies for mobility despite the challenges they face, and strategies that organize their middle class lives as people of color, once mobility is achieved. They also argued that more research should focus on the many ethnically specific variants of minority cultures of mobility that exist in the US immigrant populations of color. In this essay, I call for utilizing their framework and researching one such ethnically *and gender-specific* variant—a *kriola culture of mobility* (KCM).

### **Kriola Culture of Mobility: A Theoretical Approach that Centers Kriolas**

Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) assert that there are many variants of minority mobility cultures, each arising from “ethnically distinctive cultural idioms, practices and institutions” (p. 951). They believe, and I agree, that both the distinction among immigrants of color in this country and the different patterns of cultural diffusion each community displays deserve further

research. As one of many minority cultures of mobility, KCM comprises the cultural elements and practices that Cabo Verdean women use to thrive socioeconomically and culturally in the contemporary United States context of racial and economic inequality. Studies examining KCM will be able to capture the experience of Cabo Verdean women who are “moving into” US mainstream culture in ways that preserve the intersectional and multicultural dynamism of said experiences. For Kriolas themselves, especially younger Kriolas, this new research will further elevate pathways that they themselves can take as they pursue a culturally edifying, self-authored life in the US. Cabo Verdean immigration to the US is majority female, just as US society itself is quickly becoming one where a majority of young people grow up in single mother, multicultural homes. In other words, to clarify our understanding of how Kriolas make a way, is to understand something important about most of our communities thrive, and about a large majority of American youth grow up.

**Some Directions for Future KCM Research.** Research on KCM allows for a centering of the intersectional and transnational experience of Kriolas as normative and common—which it is, producing much needed insights on the intersection of race, culture, gender and social mobility in the 21st century. Some immediate questions said research could explore would include:

- a comprehensive, empirical account of KCM, including its intersection with issues of race, ethnicity, class, educational and professional attainment, context and generation;
- the relationship between KCM and African American culture and other cultures of color in the US;
- the connections between KCM and Cabo Verdean culture as defined by both Kriolas living in the US and those living in Cabo Verde;
- how KCM informs black feminist theory and practice;

—how KCM influences the educational or professional trajectories of Kriolas and of the young people they raise.

### **Implications for Multicultural Life in the 21st Century**

Much has been made of the demographic change in the world, as people whose worlds have been destroyed by the geopolitical and economic abuses of the global North, are coming to the so-called first world to escape poverty and violence. Whether considered immigrant or refugee, human beings are flowing across borders and insisting that they will not, if they can help it, stay put to die or watch their children die. Additionally, agencies such as the World Bank projects that 143 million people could be displaced by catastrophic climate events by 2050 (McDonnell, 2018). Some of us understand that this human flow is not only natural, but just, and good. But many of us, including the current American president decry this an “invasion” that spells the end of civilization. In March 2019, the *New York Times* reported that over 70,000 people crossed the border into the United States seeking refuge in the previous month alone, a dramatic increase to what is always a significant flow of newcomers (Dickerson, 2019). Independent of the number of new migrants, rough estimates suggest that eleven million people live in America as undocumented persons. While this is deemed “a problem” by those on the right, demographers and economists alike confirm that immigrants are the reason that the US has escaped the population decline and related dire economic consequences faced by other developed nations. The fact is that demography, like history, is not concerned with how one feels about it. Demography simply is.

While I see the primary contribution of KCM to be the way it can illuminate and ideally support the lives of Kriolas in the diaspora specifically, I believe KCM holds additional, broader implications for all multicultural societies—or, almost all societies in this century. We should



study KCM and other minority cultures of mobility because within them are visions for empowered and successful multicultural lives. Scholarship on cultural straddlers and diasporic peoples, while still often treated as niche subject matter, is actually essential scholarship for the 21st century. The particularities of Kriolas, the nuances of how they travel between worlds, translate aspirations, produce adaptations and innovate on future-world building, offer all of us strategies, pedagogies and imaginations for how to live in our time.

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