

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

World literature, postcolonial studies, and coolie odysseys: J.-M.G. le Clézio's and Amitav Ghosh's Indian ocean novels

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7pt30404>

Journal

Comparative Literature, 67(3)

ISSN

0010-4124

Author

Lionnet, F

Publication Date

2015-09-01

DOI

10.1215/00104124-3137225

Peer reviewed

FRANÇOISE LIONNET

World Literature, Postcolonial Studies, and Coolie Odysseys: J.-M.G. Le Clézio's and Amitav Ghosh's Indian Ocean Novels

How are we to conceive of, precisely, a world where we only find a globe, an astral universe, or an earth without a sky (or to cite Rimbaud and reversing him, a sea without a sun)?

The unity of a world is not one: it is made of diversity, including disparity and opposition. . . . The unity of a world is nothing other than its diversity, and its diversity is, in turn, a diversity of worlds. A world is a multiplicity of worlds, the world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the sharing out [*partage*] and the mutual exposure in this world of all its worlds.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization* 47, 109

Celui qui connaît bien le ciel ne peut rien craindre de la mer (He who knows the sky has nothing to fear from the sea, 40; trans. modified)

—Le Clézio, *Le chercheur d'or* 48

It was impossible to think of this as water at all—for water surely needed a boundary, a rim, a shore, to give it shape and hold it in place? This was a firmament, like the night sky, holding the vessel aloft as if it were a planet or a star.

—Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 363

IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, an ancient region of multipolar exchanges, boundaries are always being blurred. Landmasses dissolve into archipelagoes. Rivers flow into saltwater marshes. Islands are hyphens between continents, and identities are not what they seem. Africa meets Asia across the Arabian Sea. Europe and the Middle East come down the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to the Seychelles and the Mascarenes. The labyrinth of the Sundarbans forms the seaward fringe of the Ganges. Currents in the Bay of Bengal link the Subcontinent to Indonesia,

Australia, and Antarctica. Strategic small island territories—Reunion, Mayotte, Kerguelen, Chagos—are controlled by the NATO allies of France, the U.K., and the U.S., all geophysically distant states. Socotra, Nicobar, Zanzibar, Prince Edwards, Cocos, and Christmas, on the other hand, belong to the Indian Ocean rim nations of Yemen, India, Tanzania, South Africa, and Australia, respectively. The vertical imprint of power and violence has left a palimpsest of polyglot names on these virtual confetti of empire.

For J.-M.G. Le Clézio and Amitav Ghosh, two prolific award-winning writers translated into dozens of languages, to write about the region is to train their reader's eye on transversal and lateral exchanges, and not merely on the dynamics of subordination in this fluctuating and undulating world. Their mobile characters embody the pluralities of a terraqueous environment where the horizon of meaning is always being renegotiated. The diverse actors who navigate its expanse today do so by sea and by air, yet the primordial relation between the deep and the celestial remains as hypnotic as it was for Le Clézio's and Ghosh's characters.

Le Clézio's Mauritian cycle and Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy merge history and geography in a series of interconnected narratives that bear witness to the experiences of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century migrants as they follow the stars and cross the waters to build new lives away from hardship and adversity at home. Their odyssey toward fateful environments alien to their rural origins—in Brittany for Le Clézio's characters, in Bihar for Ghosh's—brings them face to face with cosmological, marine, and geological realities that recalibrate the familiar as the world expands and new encounters take shape. In keeping with Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on *mondialisation*, I suggest that these Indian Ocean novels paint "A world [that] is a multiplicity of worlds" (47), the outcome of which is "the sharing out . . . and the mutual exposure in this world of all its worlds" (109).

Driven by political and economic circumstances into a one-way passage to Mauritius, toward "l'autre bout du monde" and "l'autre bout du temps" (the other end of the world and of time),¹ the characters break the silence of the subaltern. The novels rewrite world history from below as the migrants seek to make sense of the momentous and seductive diversities to which they are exposed: Ghosh's build new solidarities as "the original jahaz-bhais" (ship-siblings; *River* 25) on a repurposed blackbirder (or slave ship) put into service for the coolie trade after the British abolition of slavery; Le Clézio's learn to shed romantic longings for the past and take significant risks as they follow the ethical summons of the strangers with whom they come face to face.

In this essay, I propose an approach to the study of these novels as *littérature mondialisante* rather than *littérature-monde*—that is, as *world-forming* literature rather than world literature. In doing so, I draw upon Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical discussion in *The Creation of the World or Globalization* in order to shift extant notions of world literature toward a critical practice attentive both to the mobilities *within* the texts and to the circulation of these texts into contexts where some original meanings are inevitably untranslatable (see Cassin and Apter), since the books encompass multiplicities that few readers are equipped to grasp in their entirety. I begin with historical and theoretical considerations about post-

¹ These phrases or versions of them reappear in almost all of Le Clézio novels and short stories. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified. When I modify a translation, I indicate "trans. modified."

colonial world literature and proceed to a comparative discussion of the goals and aesthetic priorities of each author. I then discuss the consequences of anthropologist Engseng Ho's distinction between the colonial and the imperial for both Indian Ocean studies and the literary analysis of authors with "geographical sensibilities as large as whole empires" ("Empire" 241). Finally, I discuss the way histories of slavery and indenture in Mauritius converge in monuments and documents pertaining to that history: World Heritage commemorative sites and the novels of Le Clézio and Ghosh. I conclude with brief close readings that elucidate the diverging representations of gender and absence by these writers and relate these concerns to Nancy's aesthetics of absolute immanence.

While the ways in which Le Clézio and Ghosh engage with notions of exile, odyssey, and alterity are dissimilar, their creative goals converge in a shared critique of European colonial dominance and predatory globalization, in a passion for cross-cultural dialogue, and in their genuine concern for environmental justice. Although these themes have appealed to a broad and sympathetic readership as receptive to their imaginative recreation of the past as it is curious about their personal journeys across cultures, continents, and archipelagos, Ghosh's approach to dialogue and exchange is, in the end, far more optimistic than Le Clézio's, who tends to represent the outcome of mixing and *métissage* in the melancholy mode of failure and impossibility.

In a 1994 survey, Le Clézio was voted "best living French writer" by the readers of the literary journal *Lire* (see Argand and Vantroys; and Vantroys, "Elu 'Meilleur écrivain'"). He has a sense of colonial and world history that is rare among contemporary French writers, his renown continues to grow across the globe, and his critical reception has been outstanding (see Association Le Clézio). Yet, in the United States his 2008 Nobel Prize was greeted with perplexity because he remains virtually unknown to the general public and the object of skepticism on the part of some influential academic critics, who point either to his lack of formal originality or to his tendency to deploy nostalgia and exoticism when dealing with the non-Western cultures and characters that figure prominently in his books.²

Thrown early into a life of displacement, Le Clézio was born and raised in Southern France during and after World War II, while his father served as a medical doctor in the British colonial army in Africa. At the age of eight, he spent a formative year in Onitsha, Nigeria, where his francophone mother had taken her sons to be with their anglophile father. He then lived in Aix-en-Provence, Bristol, London, Thailand, Mexico, Panama, New Mexico, Morocco, Mauritius, and South Korea. His adolescence in Nice kept him enfolded in his family's Franco-Mauritian colonial heritage, steeped in their use of regional idioms or *mauricianismes*. His spoken French still retains intonations and inflections typical of this milieu. He began writing in 1985 a "Mauritian cycle" of novels, which feature the fictionalized interconnected histories of his family and the diverse ethnicities whose experiences of deportation produced the hybrid cultures of the Mascarenes. When evoking the Mauritian people's well-known tolerance for ethnic, religious, and cultural plurality, he points to the logical ethical consequences of these dispositions: "Cela oblige à porter une grande attention à tout le monde. Mais il ne

² Lila Azam Zanganeh quotes comments to this effect by Philip Watts and Madeleine Dobie. Reviews by Henry Peyre, Peter Brooks, Thomas R. Edwards, and Elizabeth Hawes give an overview of scholarly perceptions of his work within the U.S.

s'agit pas seulement de vivre côte à côte. Coexister . . . implique une compréhension de ce qui peut offenser l'autre" (Joignot; This requires that careful attention be paid to everyone. It is not just a question of living side by side. To coexist . . . implies understanding of what can offend the other). For Le Clézio, civil society has to be built on a sustained dialogue about difference rather than on the bland or vague toleration that amounts to generalized *indifference* in the liberal democratic consensus, the "live and let live" of non-interference on which *laissez-faire* capitalism is based (see Joignot).

Le Clézio's quasi-trilogy of *Le chercheur d'or* (1985; translated as *The Prospector*, 1993), *Voyage à Rodrigues* (1986), and *La quarantaine* (1996) was followed by *Révolutions* (2003) and *Ritournelle de la faim* (2008), two novels that are more distantly engaged with the Indian Ocean, but whose main characters' Mauritian heritage is crucial to the overall vision, plot, and style. In search of the varieties of indigenous knowledges and cultures across time and space and beyond the contingencies of fate, the distractions of superficial differences, and the frenetic modernization that his earlier works scathingly denounce, Le Clézio writes against the dichotomies of reason and feeling, thought and affect, seeking to dismantle what he terms in *Lextase matérielle* (1967) "cette machine infernale" (247; this infernal machine) of rational critical thinking and the flaws of systematic approaches to knowledge: the "vertige d'analyse et de séparation" (247; vertiginous drive to analyze and discriminate). He seeks above all to put his readers in intimate contact with the quotidian messiness and immediacy of the experiential.

Less nomadic than Le Clézio, but, like him, the son of a military officer retired from the British Indian Army, Ghosh was born and raised in Calcutta and Delhi and then studied in England. He has lived and worked in New York and Massachusetts. Ghosh spent time researching Mauritius's history in the island's National Archives and in public and private libraries, exploring the social and cultural consequences of its central role as immigration hub for the global coolie trade³—namely, the intermingling of population and interweaving of influences that he translates into challenging multilingual and raucous storytelling. As historian Antoinette Burton admiringly puts it: "If you have ever tried to explain . . . the seriality of abolition, indenture, and transportation, or the multiple moving parts of colonial power, you have in *Sea of Poppies* as historically nuanced and narratively accessible an account as you will find anywhere else" (75).

Ghosh's experience as a doctoral student doing anthropological fieldwork and living among strangers in Egypt was critical to the development of the "xenophilia"⁴ that informs his practice as a writer: "Not only did this teach me to observe what I was seeing; it also taught me how to translate raw experience on to the page. It was the best kind of training a novelist could have and it has stood me in good stead over the years. Much of my writing has been influenced by this experience" ("Confessions" 38). After moving back to the Subcontinent, where he is now

³ The word "coolie," which became a derogatory epithet primarily associated with migrant laborers of Indian descent in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans or of Chinese descent in Hawai'i and the Philippines, has no specific ethnic connotation etymologically. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it derives from the Tamil *kulī*, meaning payment for work performed, and possibly from the Urdu *qulī*, itself derived from the Turkish *kul*, or slave.

⁴ Ghosh borrows the term from Leela Gandhi, who discusses the ethical premises of hospitality and "xenophilia" (73) and the "irremediable leakiness of imperial boundaries" (3).

settled in Goa, he began publishing in 2008 his *Ibis* trilogy: *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire*, which was published to great acclaim in spring 2015. An encyclopedic project, the trilogy features larger-than-life characters moving across the Indian Ocean from the banks of the Ganges and Calcutta, east to Canton and west to Bombay, Mauritius, and Cape Town.

Le Clézio is sometimes studied as a francophone postcolonial writer (Martin; Mauguière and Thibault) rather than a metropolitan one, whereas Ghosh is routinely classified as postcolonial (Fletcher and Ray, for example), and sometimes as postmodern (Chenniappan and Suresh). But Ghosh has shrugged off the postcolonial label and its racialized implications. In a 2008 interview, he confesses: "I must admit that after years of being asked about 'postcolonial writing' I'm still not sure what it means. I recently heard a critic say that it was just another term for the work of nonwhite writers who write in English. If that is so then there is certainly a postcolonial dimension to my books" (Interview). Le Clézio is likewise wary of labels. Speaking of his 2014 novella *Tempête*, he explains that the title is a distant gesture of respect for Aimé Césaire's play, which he prefers to Shakespeare's *Tempest*, but which shares no common ground with his own: "Il n'y a pas de point commun, la pièce de Césaire est une pièce de l'insurrection. Je n'écris pas des livres politiques. C'est un hommage, une audace" (Devarrieux; There is no common ground, Césaire's play is about insurrection. I do not write political books. That is just a form of homage, a bold move). His use of the term "insurrection" underscores the anti-colonial scenarios prominent in the creative and political writings of Césaire and his peers, scenarios that made it possible for subsequent generations to think beyond the impasses of oppositional thinking. Le Clézio's problematic endorsement of the *littérature-monde* manifesto of 2007 reveals, however, that his priority, like that of the forty-three other co-signatories, is the "monde" of world literature *in French* rather than either the multilingual representation of the *monde* or the constraining exclusionary definitions that relegate francophone (and postcolonial) writers to a separate and tendentious ideological camp (see Lionnet, "Universalisms").

Ghosh too has been explicit about being inured to anti-colonial and nationalist "tiers-mondisme" ("Confessions" 41) and its interpretive protocols. As he puts it in a 2012 address titled "Confessions of a Xenophile," within the cosmopolitan contexts he writes about human complexity cannot be reduced to expedient binary scenarios:

Those of us who grew up in that period will recall how powerfully we were animated by an emotion that is rarely named: this is xenophilia, the love of the other, the affinity for strangers—a feeling that lives very deep in the human heart, but whose very existence is rarely acknowledged. These gestures . . . may be imbued with both pomposity and pathos, but they are not empty: they represent a yearning to reclaim an interrupted cosmopolitanism. (37)

I will return to the question of cosmopolitanism below. Let me stress for now that there continues to be a great deal of disagreement, among theorists and others, about what the postcolonial means in relation to the colonial and the global.

Without rehearsing that thorny debate, I want to note with Robert Young that there is some overlap between the designations "world literature" and "postcolonial writing." For Young, "If world literature is universal, postcolonial literature, though partial [i.e., more local], achieves a certain universality through its relation to the ethical," which he defines as an interest in humanity and the humane

“in its broadest sense (which means that it will also be concerned with the lives of animals)” (218). But these universalist concerns must be paired, Young continues, with a “*critical* focus which challenges inhumanity in its modes of the abuse of power in whatever particular historical form that might take” (218; emphasis mine). He also stresses that sustained “questions of justice, of human rights, of ecology, . . . or the continuing struggles of colonized and indigenous peoples” are constitutive characteristics, since postcolonial literature can never be “neutral.” Such an ethico-political stance is, for him, a necessary condition for belonging to the corpus of postcolonial texts. In Ato Quayson’s historical overview, the field raises “key questions about nation and narration, the struggle between universalism and localism in the literature of the newly independent nations, and the fraught intersections of the aesthetic, the ethical and the political dimensions of these new forms of writing” (2).

Young’s programmatic overview can provide multiple points of entry into the works of Le Clézio and Ghosh, since both are committed to sustaining a global dialogue of cultures and denouncing the narrow -isms that undermine or simply interrupt this fragile conversation. A strong sense of ethics motivates their creative choices, although their respective narrative strategies for deploying moral value produce contradictory outcomes. The logic of Le Clézio’s stories leads to forms of absence congruent with the historical invisibility of subaltern lives. Ghosh, by contrast, convincingly develops in his trilogy alternative modes of expressiveness that give full presence to colorful characters, including women. Nevertheless, the writings of both authors instantiate “interactive universalisms,” to borrow—and make plural—an expression used in the singular by feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib, for whom “interactive universalism acknowledges that every generalized other is also a concrete other” (165). As a regulative ideal that transcends philosophical principles and moralizing clichés, Benhabib’s interactive universalism “regards difference as a starting point for reflection and action” and “does not deny our embodied and embedded identity” (153); rather, it seeks to acknowledge that difference is the starting point and common ground of social interactions in both the public and private spheres, domains which feminist and cultural critics have shown to be artificially constructed and porous rather than distinct. But whereas Benhabib’s singular universalism seeks to encourage “political transformations that can yield *a* point of view acceptable to all” (153; emphasis mine), by using universalisms in the plural, I attempt to free her concept of its univocity and to underscore, along with Zygmunt Bauman, that “the pursuit of universality does not involve . . . the pressure to reach cultural consensus” (202), but the ability to arrive at “mutual understanding.”⁵ This means that we can agree to disagree and decide to proceed along alternate paths while also respecting differences and recognizing that pluralities need not be transcended in order for fruitful dialogue and communication to result in productive and respectful compromise.

Decentered and decentering fictions such as Le Clézio’s and Ghosh’s can effectively produce what I understand as interactive universalisms. The narrative deployment of characters whose divergent points of view are serially given center stage corresponds to an ethical concern for dissimilar others. But this is a concern that

⁵ For Jürgen Habermas and his disciples (including Benhabib), “understanding” is consensus, although her emphasis on the concrete is much more productive than his.

needs to be coupled with the will to encourage respect not just for difference as the physical or cultural property of an embodied subject but also for the changing stakes of political representation and fictional self-presentation in a world crisscrossed by subjects “who have the right to go on—differently” (Bauman 202) as agents of their own world-fashioning stories. As a vehicle for worlding, “world-forming” or world-creation—that is, for *mondialisation* (44; globalization) in Nancy’s sense—decentering narratives embrace contradictions instead of presenting a univocal perspective and a linear temporality. To create “a world” is to register the immanent dimension of human contact and the unpredictable becomings or “*mondanisation*” (44; world-becoming) to which face-to-face encounters give rise.

The recurrence of themes and reappearance of characters across the cycle of both writers’ novels amplify the aporias of *mondanisation*, the simultaneous world-becoming of the characters and becoming-world of words and images, earth and sky, sea and sun, as key elements that create the inner resonances of the texts and the creative obsessions that motivate the writers’ acts of witnessing. Despite their understandable allergy to labels, both conjure structures of feeling and textures of history that make them postcolonial *world* writers invested both in the *longue durée* and the ethical representation of everyday life, but in such ways that outcomes are never foreclosed.

Neither writer exhibits the kind of “language anxiety” that remains, for Young (and others), “fundamental” to postcolonial writing in “a major European language such as English or French” (219–20). Each uses without qualms languages and dialects as a means of putting into narrative “the mutual exposure in this world of all its worlds” (109), to borrow again from Nancy’s formulation. They thereby recognize, in Benhabib’s terms, “the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid” (153). This ethical direction is one of increased openness to shared meaning-making and dialogic exchange. Le Clézio and Ghosh negotiate the divide between relativism and moral authority by steering the reader’s empathies toward an ideal of inclusivity that thus comes close to my notion of interactive universalisms.

For Le Clézio, this is translated into a style that is classical and refined, and a descriptive practice that is as precise as it is poetic, sensual, and haunting. If he seamlessly inflects his French prose with regional expressions (*affouche, varangue, filaos, bagasse, manaf*), at other times he sets songs and vernacular terms apart typographically or by italicizing them; he does the same for English words commonly used locally. He follows the shifting points of views of dispossessed whites and subaltern companions, but his texts also equivocate, alternating between the desire for harmonizing resolutions and the implicit recognition that multitudes cannot be contained within a univocal version of history. As a result, the logic of his narratives shows him caught between, on the one hand, Benhabib’s version of a respectful but paradoxically singular universalism and Nancy’s insistence that “unity . . . is not one: it is made of diversity, including disparity and opposition” (109). Le Clézio’s most recent statement on the topic of respect epitomizes this ambiguity and the aesthetic choices it underwrites (see Joignot). In every new story, he wrestles with moral uncertainties and the temptation of real or metaphorical escape as an aesthetic solution to the impasse of ambiguity. These uncertainties remain the primary horizon of meaning for him, the “meaning at work

beyond the work” that corresponds for Nancy to the work of art’s radical potential, that is, its ability to exist beyond or to exceed preset finality and “all submission to an end” (54). This intransitivity of art is, for Nancy, what propels human beings “beyond all humanism,” as a pre-given value, toward planetary multiplicities “without models, without principle and without given end” (54).

Ghosh’s capacious multilingual style immediately denotes such multiplicities: it is a picaresque mix of maritime adventures with ambiguous outcomes, of protagonists who speak a confusing mix of vernaculars and who thereby demonstrate endless flexibility and the ability to survive by revising perceptions and practices on the go. As a result, the narrative destabilization of hegemonic speech and uniform perspective produces a baroque account of the forces that motivate human agents. Momentous social transformations are laced with hilarious and memorable anecdotes as well as quasi-magical episodes that blur languages as well as generic conventions. The first chapter of *River of Smoke*, for example, is peppered with some four dozen words of French-based Mauritian Creole used either in the characters’ conversations or to communicate the interiority of the now aging Deeti, the matriarch of the Colver clan established in Mauritius after the *Ibis* reached its shores decades earlier: “La Fami Colver, as they said in Kreol” (3).⁶ Here, too, Nancy’s insights are relevant, for the success of the “fami,” the ship-siblings and their descendants, is that they constitute a new creolized “world” as they come together “in the name of the fact that this *world* is coming out of nothing, that there is nothing before it, . . . and that is precisely *what* forms the justice and the meaning of a world” (55). Nancy’s formulation of newness is analogous to an understanding of creolization as a process that yields unpredictable results, a creative transformation “without principle and without given end,” or what the Mauritian poet and theorist of coolitude Khal Torabully has defined as “a process of identity construction which takes into account the impossibility of putting a full stop to this task” (Carter 155).

The creation and embrace of this inclusive “world” of meaning by both authors, and its seemingly utopian populism, has met with skepticism on the part of theorists distrustful of practices aimed at building realist consensus rather than furthering critique and who therefore prefer more *unambiguous* denunciations of power. But as even Benhabib specifies, “universality is not the ideal consensus of fictitiously defined selves”; rather, it is “the struggle of concrete, embodied selves, striving for autonomy” (153). I would, however, prefer to qualify the term “autonomy” in order to include the possibility of transformative relationality as integral to its definition; to represent incremental measures of autonomy by means of small narratives is to communicate the concreteness and embodiment of those present and interacting in the literary microcosm. The sharing of stories elicits affective responses from other characters as well as readers who come to *know* difference and thus develop compassion for others rather than giving in to the negative affects of suspicion, a tactic that is necessary to survival but interests neither Le Clézio nor Ghosh in as much as their focus is on internal group dynamics rather than on the fight against monolithic global power or its capillary reach. The stylistic thrust of their absorbing narratives enfolds their readers into a condition of complete receptivity, and this suspension of disbelief trumps ideological

⁶ For an informative overview of *River of Smoke*’s use of Kreol, see the article on “mauricianismes” dated January 2012 on the “anonymous” website.

critique and watchfulness. Their actual postcoloniality (they came of age in the 1950s and 60s, respectively) makes them acutely aware of the pitfalls of what Eve Sedgwick has called “paranoid reading” (123), the hypervigilance or chronic distrust by critics of a writer’s tropes and the desires they might encode.

Such distancing and controlling vigilance translates into a hermeneutic of negative affects, the “default position of contemporary criticism” (Felski 57) that valorizes cynicism and considers the condition of absorption and enchantment to be “an alarming prospect” (57) for the scrupulous critic intent on resisting the pleasures of the text and the seductions of reading. As an activity that encourages one’s initial loss of self within the world of another, reading is a form of dialogue that can open beyond pre-given cultural meanings so as not to foreclose outcomes. For Nancy, too, the labor of writing and of reading “is not determined by a goal of mastery (domination, usefulness, appropriation)” (54), but by the always unforeseen potential of real and virtual encounters that bring forth the world of meaning in which “world-becoming engages a displacement of value, and world-forming a displacement of production” (44).

The distinction between process and result, or value and production, which denotes Nancy’s debt to Marx, can be useful to literary analysis, since fictional worlds that embed new values will also produce new modes of being and new subjects of knowledge. The creation or production of a fictional world that can best coincide with the “being-in-the-world [*être-au-monde*]” (44) of multitudes is, by this logic, a process of shared communication that is also an acknowledgment of the becoming or *mondanisation* of subjects under the mundane, material, and immanent conditions of contact and exchange. On this view, fictional world-forming is a creative means of putting into narrative what *exceeds* preexisting consensus. The creative process brings together what was distinct, had been divided, or subsumed due to the consensus, thereby opening spheres of freedom that offer new potential for the full enjoyment and deployment of more autonomous lives connected within large historic patterns of global exchange in which “human beings create the world, which produces the human, which creates itself as absolute value and enjoyment [*jouissance*] of that value” (37), to follow Nancy’s reading of Marx’s *The German Ideology*. Thus, when Nancy goes on to ask, “How are we to conceive of, precisely, a world where we only find a globe . . . an earth without a sky (or to cite Rimbaud and reversing him, a sea without a sun)?” (47), we are reminded of the importance of looking beyond familiar ground (earth) and adopting a broad perspective that is inclusive of the marine and the submarine, the astral and the extraterrestrial.

A central character in Ghosh’s trilogy, Deeti is the first person we encounter at the opening of both *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. An illiterate and widowed poppy farmer from Bihar, she is endowed with a gift of vision. Having known only a landlocked existence in her native province, she experiences complete disorientation and loss of moorings once she is on the *Ibis*. Now she has to take into account the novelty of the boundless sea, the fearsome and polluting dark waters that devout Hindus know to avoid, but she realizes that the elements are not as they seem, that their identity fluctuates, and that the sea is “a firmament, like the night sky, holding the vessel aloft as if it were a planet or a star” (363). Her world expands to include all matter, from the sea to the stars, and she can even make better sense of her visions by translating them into drawings on the interior walls of the ship’s

hold. Ghosh devises this entirely plausible way of documenting otherwise the experiment of indenture, its affective dimension and afterlives. Deeti's visual narratives create realities that world *us* in turn, as we are put in the position of being able to internalize *her* gaze and so experience her understanding of that subaltern history. Deeti is the chronicler of history from below, and her presence at the opening of both novels testifies to the importance of her gaze and the meaningfulness of images that we never *see* but which become the tangible traces of her alternative narratives of identity and knowledge.

Ghosh's attentiveness to the way historical events "are felt on the pulses of the people who undergo them" would qualify in Young's scheme as a "distinctive mode of postcolonial writing" (218). For the theorist, the salient conditions of postcolonial writing are a combination of the subjective (the characters' points of view) and the objective (planetary events) together with the exposure of the dissymmetries of power: hence, the best postcolonial features of Ghosh's books include this social and ideological critique of nineteenth-century forces of global trade and their impact on the affective and moral economies of agents and victims of the opium and coolie trades. But, in my view, it is the *worlding* of these characters, their plasticity in the face of unpredictable circumstances, that makes possible their embrace of *mondanisation*, or world-becoming in Nancy's sense, beyond the destructive forces of globalization. This qualifies them as the exemplary protagonists of a world literature understood as intrinsically *world-forming* precisely because it is a vehicle for meaning-making, for truths that escape the systems of representation and argumentation of either traditional historiography or postcolonial critique.

In a similar vein, two crucial but succinct episodes of Le Clézio's *Le chercheur d'or* (*The Prospector*) denounce the organized yet chaotic modernity of late-nineteenth-century work on the plantation, evoking for the reader familiar with French and African literatures similar scenes in Emile Zola and Sembene Ousmane. Le Clézio describes the punishing labor of the workers from the point of view of the scared young boy, Alexis, who is venturing for the first time into the sugar mill:

Les champs sont pleins d'hommes et de femmes qui travaillent. Les hommes ont des sabres d'abattage, des faucilles, et les femmes vont avec leurs houes. . . . Les hommes sont torse nu, ils ruissellent de sueur. . . . Il y a une odeur âcre dans l'air, l'odeur de la sève des cannes, de la poussière, de la sueur des hommes. . . . Il y a des enfants qui courent avec nous sur le chemin, des Indiens, des Cafres, ils mangent les cannes tombées au sol. . . . Juste devant nous, je vois le groupe d'hommes qui enfourne la bagasse des cannes broyées dans la fournaise. Ils sont presque nus, pareils à des géants. La sueur coule sur leur dos noir, sur leurs visages crispés par la douleur du feu. (20–21)

The fields are full of working men and women. The men have their cutlasses and sickles and the women their hoes. . . . The men's chests are bare and streaming with sweat. . . . There is a sour odor in the air, an odor of cane sap, dust, and men's sweat. . . . There are children running with us on the pathways, Indian and African ones, eating the stalks of cane that fall to the ground. . . . Directly in front of us, I see a group of men shoveling the bagasse of crushed cane into the furnace. They look like giants, almost naked, the sweat running down their black backs, their faces twisted in pain from the heat of the fire. (11–12; trans. modified)

A few pages later, with arson fires burning in the fields, the rebellion gets underway. The episode corresponds to the historic insurrection of 1892 and is described as a metaphoric hurricane in which human and environmental sounds become impossible to differentiate:

[J]'entends le bruit de l'émeute. . . . C'est une rumeur comme celle de l'orage, qui semble venir de tous les côtés à la fois, qui résonne dans les gorges des montagnes. Il y a des cris, des grondements, des coups de feu aussi. . . . [J]e vois la gueule béante du four à bagasse, où tourbillonnent les étincelles. (61–62)

I can . . . hear the sound of the riot. It echoes in the mountain gorges, sounding like a storm that is coming from all sides at once. There are shouts and grumbles and gunshots. . . . I can see the gaping mouth of the bagasse oven with its swirling sparks. (55; trans. modified)

Outnumbered by the workers they are attempting to suppress, two white overseers on horseback try to flee, but the third, the sadistic field manager Dumont, falls off his mount, is beaten by the crowd, and then thrown into the furnace. A mass of indistinct bodies “avance, recule, dans une sorte de danse étrange, tandis que les cris font une modulation stridente” (62; “advances and retreats in a strange kind of dance modulated by shrill cries,” 56; trans. modified).

When the disastrous, historic, and unprecedented storm of 29 April 1892 pumels the island the natural environment likewise becomes an indistinct mass: “Il n’y a plus ni ciel ni terre, seulement cette masse liquide, et le vent qui emporte les arbres et la boue rouge” (74; “Sky and earth have disappeared; there is only this liquid mass left, and the wind carrying off the trees, and the red mud,” 69 trans. modified). As he tries to process what he witnesses, Alexis is filled with fear. He experiences bouts of “nausée” (62, 77; “nausea” 56, 72), dizziness, and vertigo, and his already shaky moorings are lost: “j’ai l’impression de glisser en avant, de tomber” (77; “I feel as if I am sliding forward, falling,” 72; trans. modified). Despite his initial ability, like Ghosh’s Deeti, to rely on the sky and the stars to find his way and interpret his fate—“Celui qui connaît bien le ciel ne peut rien craindre de la mer” (48; “He who knows the sky has nothing to fear from the sea,” 40; trans. modified), his father had insisted—Alexis can no longer make sense of the signs around him. He has lost all interpretive frameworks; his “world has lost its capacity to ‘form a world’ [*faire monde*].” It has become “*immonde*,” abject in the face of brutality and horror (Nancy 34).

Toward the end of the book, when “la rumeur de l’émeute” (311; “the sound of rioting,” 315; trans. modified) and plantation fires in the localities of Yemen, Médine, and Walhalla bring Alexis back to the area (in 1922), he recalls the 1892 rebellion, the murder of the white man by Indian workers, and the sudden silence that fell afterwards, “le silence de la foule quand il a disparu dans la bouche flamboyante du four” (312; “the silence of the crowd after he disappeared into the gaping fiery mouth,” 316; trans. modified). He sets off to search for Ouma, who has taken refuge from the fires near the sea, and once again feels a rush of “vertige” (314), as Ouma’s anger brings home to him his inability to take the full measure of the suffering of others.

Human and environmental chaos follows from these shocks. But, by contrast, the controlled fluidity with which Le Clézio’s prose renders the violence of the colony points to the dissociative consequences of trauma for those who witness it. His encounter with the brutal realities of colonial exploitation leaves the young Alexis deadened and mute, unable to share with anyone what he has seen. He is literally filled with “seulement le silence du vent sur les feuilles de cannes” (63; “only the silence of the wind on the cane leaves,” 57). The quiet after the storm is but a displacement of his affectless disposition, a coping mechanism that translates into self-dispossession.

Le Clézio masterfully translates the full *phenomenological* dimension of the boy's limited perceptions and experiences. I want to insist on this phenomenological approach because doing so puts the descriptions of the black working bodies into better perspective: the events are entirely presented from Alexis's point of view.⁷ Using colonial discourse analysis, one would find much to critique about the way Alexis views the workers as "giants, almost naked, the sweat running down their black backs" (12). He sees them as an un-individuated mass that he then assimilates to ominous and formidable natural phenomena—namely, the storm that turns sea, sky, and earth into another indistinct and liquid mass. The loss of boundaries and the fear of the black Other, common features of colonial anxiety, are thus collapsed into a singular experience of utter shock that destroys the world-as-known—the *(un)heimlich*—and transforms into the uncanny what was comfortable and familiar. Alexis undergoes a tragic un-worlding that sets the stage for consciousness-raising and his newly found ability to be critical of hegemonic power. He is reborn into an all-encompassing ethical dimension that exceeds critique and rises to the greater complexities of Benhabib's and Bauman's differentiated "interactive" models of universality. The world-destroying potential of this shock to the senses is, I suggest, another form of world-becoming that awakens Le Clézio's protagonist to injustice.

In "Confessions of a Xenophile," Ghosh states that his goal is to "attempt to restore and recommence the exchanges and conversations . . . interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance" (37) and subsequent nationalisms. Without colonial intervention this gradual dialogue would have proceeded along predictable or unpredictable pathways, in keeping with existing practices of sociability and conviviality long characteristic of the interactive cultures of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, exchanges that predate this intervention can only be imagined today in a continuum or *longue durée* measurable by means other than the modern practices of classification, periodization, and standardized timekeeping introduced by Western rationalism and instrumentalized by the lock-step politics of nationalist interpretative paradigms.

Le Clézio is equally critical of the oppressive modes of modernity and their taxonomies. In *The Mexican Dream*, he writes of the brutally "interrupted thought of Amerindian civilizations" and speculates about the way these civilizations might have developed if their quest for knowledge and insight had not collided with the conquistadors' dream of gold and violent pursuit of the myth of Eldorado. Here, too, flawed interpretive frames lead to misapprehensions and unfortunate expectations, which result in tragedy and decimation: "La tragédie de cet affrontement est toute entière dans ce déséquilibre. C'est l'extermination d'un rêve ancien par la fureur d'un rêve moderne, la destruction des mythes par un désir de puissance. L'or, les armes modernes et la pensée rationnelle contre la magie et les dieux: l'issue ne pouvait pas être autre" (*Rêve* 11; "From that imbalance rose the tragic results of the coming together of two worlds. It was the extermination of an ancient dream by the frenzy of a modern one, the destruction of myths by a desire for power. It was gold, modern weapons, and rational thought pitted against magic and gods: the outcome could not have been otherwise," 3). Belief in mythic time was no match for

⁷ Although I use Carol Marks's translation of *Le chercheur d'or* (*The Prospector*), I modify it when necessary in order to remain faithful to Le Clézio's use of the present tense—and so his rendering of the phenomenology of the child's perception—throughout the scenes describing the riots.

the modern will to power as it annihilated the forms of knowledge for which it had no use, blocking evolving conversations and native traditions of conflict resolution. The sudden and violent disruptions of these established epistemological and social formations halted existing processes of gradual revision and reconfiguration. Modern power and rationality coerced a nominal "New World" into subjugation.

In the New World of the Western hemisphere, as in the Old World of the East Indies, these colonial disruptions undermined existing institutional and ritual frameworks that authorized specific contexts of negotiated exchange and interactive universalisms. Interpretive codes became ineffective. Instead of the slow process by means of which new meanings can emerge, become shared, contested, or revised, conquest introduced a *pensée unique* that cancelled out local temporalities, the "deep time" and "alternate durations" (Dimock) that had served to ground cultural realities for millennia.

Anthropologist Engseong Ho has pointed out, however, that it is important to decouple this disruptive colonial scenario—as described by Le Clézio for the Americas—from the more complex, fluid, and kaleidoscopic dynamics of empire building by many different groups in the Indian Ocean, the oldest ocean in terms of human contact (Pearson). The region has long been a site of encounter for Old World literate societies—Arab, African, Asian, and European; Muslim, Hindu, indigenous, and Christian—most of whom had universalist ambitions in keeping with their respective traditional, ethical, spiritual, or merely commercial goals. Fifteenth-century colonial settlements were but a "recent" intervention primarily aimed at maintaining vertical links with the European state whose military power they served. By contrast, the region's long-standing trading diasporas and the vast commercial empires they negotiated were far more likely to expand their reach by assimilating to local customs and developing successful commercial associations that thrived when peace was maintained. Ho explains that these established diasporas and their mobile agents "incessantly crossed and frustrated imperial jurisdictions" (219), creating lateral networks that managed, for a time, to ignore the arrival of hostile European forces in 1498 and continue expanding their trading territories: "From the European perspective, what was strange about this rich world of the Indian Ocean and its international economy was that no one state controlled it, or even had the idea of doing so. The Portuguese . . . were the first to think of this ocean as a unity and to thereby dream up a strategy to monopolize the means of violence within it" (217).

The binaries of aggressive xenophobia—the "us vs. them" survival reflex of distrust—developed as a result of the gradual shift from an early, inclusive, and interactive understanding of the ocean, its shores, and cultural geographies toward a far more particularistic appropriation of space that led to protracted conflicts over territorial control and sovereignty, as well as the subsequent emergence of nationalist resistance to the foreign colonial powers. A better understanding of what constitutes the "imperial" in that long history is crucial to the analysis of both colonialism and nationalism. Hence, for Ho, the weakness of postcolonial theory derives from its roots in post-independence revisions of colonial history . . . aligned . . . with the nationalist agendas of the new states. . . . Most colonial powers were not just colonial; they were imperial in extent and outlook. The many colonies which fired nationalist dreams and became so many post-colonial states were merely parts of a single empire, when viewed from the imperial center. *Thus while nationalist dreams and strategies were narrowly terrestrial, imperial ones were expansively maritime and aerial.* That remains the case today.

Whereas post-colonial theory is predominantly dual, imperialism has always been plural with respect to places and parties involved. An appreciation of its plural nature is crucial to understanding unauthorized ideological cross-currents . . . which flowed with alarming speed across empires at the beginning of the twentieth century. The subversives who peopled such movements were mobile cosmopolitans whose agendas were presumably extra-territorial. They were often members of diasporic groups . . . found across imperial domains in more innocuous dress as “trading minorities” and indentured labour. (240; emphasis mine)

These maritime and aerial dimensions of local communities determined their worldviews long before enabling the spread of similar conceptual understandings among the European military and trading powers in the region or among the migrants these powers displaced.

In his study of the nineteenth-century transformation of the Eritrean port-city of Massawa on the Red Sea into a cosmopolitan hub, Jonathan Miran documents how the “transportation revolution” and subsequent assimilation of merchants, slave traders, and commercial agents into host societies resulted in fluid cosmopolitan and Creole senses of identity for both Arab and African populations. He points to the cultural and ethnic intermixing that existed along both overland trade routes and oceanways as well as among the leading inhabitants of Massawa. The latter’s desire to “project some sense of unity within a social environment of diversity” was reinforced by “commercial, social, religious, and cultural strategies negotiated on a continuum spanning the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ and promoting a distinct idealized sense of citizenship . . . [that] transcended particularistic and sectarian identities” (6). It is into this flourishing slave and pearl trading city that the French poet Arthur Rimbaud arrived in August 1880, and the opening chapters of Le Clézio’s *La quarantaine* evoke the narrator’s grandparents’ meeting with the dying poet a decade later, in May 1891, while they are on their way from France to Mauritius via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea.

Le Clézio, like Ghosh, is drawn to this “deep time” of human history and its influence on relationships in the present. Both writers look past engagements with the interruptions of, and resistance to, the colonial moment, preferring to represent the mosaic of potentialities that anthropologists offer as alternative scenarios of cultural contact. Ho’s attempt to differentiate empire from mere colonialism provides constructive contexts for literary study. As he asserts, “peoples native to old diasporas have *geographical sensibilities as large as whole empires*; possessed of folklore, ritual and literature, their cultural memories reach back even further” (241; emphasis mine). The literary critic Isabel Hofmeyr concurs: this region “offers a rich archive of transnational forms of imagination” (585) that predate by centuries the cosmopolitan ideals of Enlightenment Europe, which appears provincial in contrast. Recent historical scholarship has also emphasized the global nature of the region (see, for example, Alpers, Bose, Larson, Pearson, Subrahmanyam, and Vink). But it is literary attention to the tangible realities “of face-to-face encounters, of everyday experience” (Ghosh, “Confessions” 40) that proves an invaluable source of critically and materially significant knowledge about the specificities of this mosaic of multidirectional encounters. It is fiction that provides access to the small narratives, the significant or telling details that can give us the texture, the fabric of human interaction in the contact zones of migratory flows. Such details provide a fuller understanding of what it means to be caught in patterns of global mobility, especially for those transiting through the heterotopias of imperial geographies, be they mobile like the ships that transport migrants

or permanent sites like the depots, prisons, and ports that funnel human cargo into new labor markets.

Along with Gaurav Desai, who has cautioned “against the temptations of nostalgia” (12) that can go hand in hand with the valorization of early and more tolerant forms of cosmopolitanism, I think it is important to recognize the risk of idealizing the past, a tendency that also haunts nationalisms and essentialisms. Desai singles out Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* as a book that pays insufficient attention to the “contexts of structurally unequal exchange” (12) between the Indian slave Bomma and his master, the twelfth-century North African Jew, Ben Yiju. Desai is right to raise such questions regarding the complexities of cross-racial intimacies then and now. But as I have argued (in the pages of this journal in 2012), *In an Antique Land* may also be read as a brilliant reflection on the methodological choices facing a novelist-researcher who endeavors to re-imagine the past and its zones of silence and invisibility in order to do justice to the production of multiply positioned subjectivities in the cosmopolitan and creolized sites in which his characters travel.

Building on Ho’s insight that the common denominator in Indian Ocean cultures corresponds to “geographical sensibilities as large as whole empires,” it is possible to argue that Le Clézio and Ghosh, like many native Mauritian writers who complicate extant colonial and postcolonial narratives of conquest, family, and maritime mobility, have a commitment to forms of relationality in literary representation that remain open to unpredictable linguistic, narrative, and political results, thanks to the basic process of renegotiation and interactive universalisms that characterizes everyday encounters and language use in Mauritius (Lionnet, *The Known* 220–43).

While both writers are vigilant about narrative strategies and how they might do justice to the spectrum of human migrations or ecological transformations in time and space, their respective standpoints and modes of engagement with the concrete realities of empire and its aftermath are, however, translated into divergent priorities that yield different understandings of epistemological diversity and gendered subjectivities. In the rest of this essay, I return to both writers’ strategies of representation and narrative logics in order to come to terms with my own conflicted reactions to the discordant forms of interactive universalisms that emerge from Le Clézio’s magnetic prose and nostalgic drifts, on the one hand, and Ghosh’s polyglot worlds and rollicking storytelling, on the other. But before embarking on further close readings of passages from their respective novels, a few final historical and theoretical points need to be made in order to call attention to the full array of concepts necessary for interpretive inclusiveness when dealing with Indian Ocean texts.

The polyglot and multiethnic world of Mauritius has been, throughout its colonial and postcolonial history, a heterotopia in Michel Foucault’s sense: a site that allows for the juxtaposition “in a single real place of several spaces, several sites that are in themselves *incompatible*” (6; emphasis mine)—incompatible, that is, if one abides by the colonial taxonomies of racial and cultural segregation, which do not correspond to the realities of human contact. Heterotopias are also an appropriate way of defining those interdisciplinary spaces that do not readily fit into the

modern rational categories of order and understanding that typically govern academic arrangements. The fields of world history and world literature attempt to overcome the divisions into distinct areas of study (for example, Africa vs. Asia, slavery vs. migrant labor, Creoles vs. coolies) that traditional disciplinary arrangements legitimize. As a case in point, the study of Mauritius demonstrates the necessity of moving past entrenched taxonomies and artificially constructed incompatibilities.

Today, Mauritius is the only country where the social histories of both slavery and indenture have been jointly recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's Convention for the National and International Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage. Adopted in Paris in November 1972, this Convention helps support the preservation of history and memory and the conservation of environmentally significant locales. Since 1972, over a thousand such sites have been selected, two of them in Mauritius: the Aapravasi Ghat or Immigration Depot (*aapravasi* means immigrant in Hindi; see figure 1) in the capital Port Louis; and Le Morne Cultural Landscape, an iconic mountain (*morne* in Creole; see figure 2) hideaway for runaway slaves located on the southwestern coast of the island. (Aapravasi Ghat was declared a World Heritage Site in 2006, and the Morne Brabant made the list in 2008.) These monuments commemorate the lives of individuals of all origins who were coerced into slavery or indenture (figures 3 and 4). These men and women were the backbone of the island's colonial economy, and their labor and culture shaped the modern nation, as my brief discussion of the cane workers' revolt in *Le chercheur d'or* has indicated.

Although each site has its own distinct memorial and cultural valence—contract migrations and resistance to slavery, respectively—both testify to patterns of globalization that have now accelerated and in which the island played an early and important role; both are also multilayered sites of memory. After the Abolition Act of 1833 (and its effective implementation in Mauritius on 1 February 1835), thousands of indentured laborers from Asia were held and processed at the Aapravasi Ghat after being lured into signing up for a forbidding ocean voyage that would take them far from home and bind them to the plantation work that former slaves now refused to perform. Half a million Indians passed through this depot between 1849 and 1923, many on their way to other parts of the British Empire, from Australia to the Caribbean. Le Morne Brabant, by contrast, is now the symbol of a global history of marronnage beginning with the Dutch occupation of Mauritius in the 1630s and continuing for the next two centuries under French and then British rule. The mountain's rugged wooded terrain, hidden caves, and sharp cliffs became known in local oral traditions as the Maroon Republic, home of escaped slaves who had been brought to the island from areas as distant as West Africa, India, and South East Asia and as close as Madagascar, the Comoros, and Mozambique.

Long-disavowed histories of intimate contact among these populations of diverse origins have become more visible thanks to the two heritage sites. Although each one first evokes distinct cultural histories, both actually represent patterns of creolization that are specific to Mauritius and that cannot simply be subsumed under the more widespread understandings of *créolité* and creolization used to conceptualize identity formation in the Caribbean and the Americas. Khal Tor-



Fig. 1. Holding cells for arriving migrants. Aapravasi Ghat or immigration depot, Port Louis harbor. Photo ©Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, used by permission.

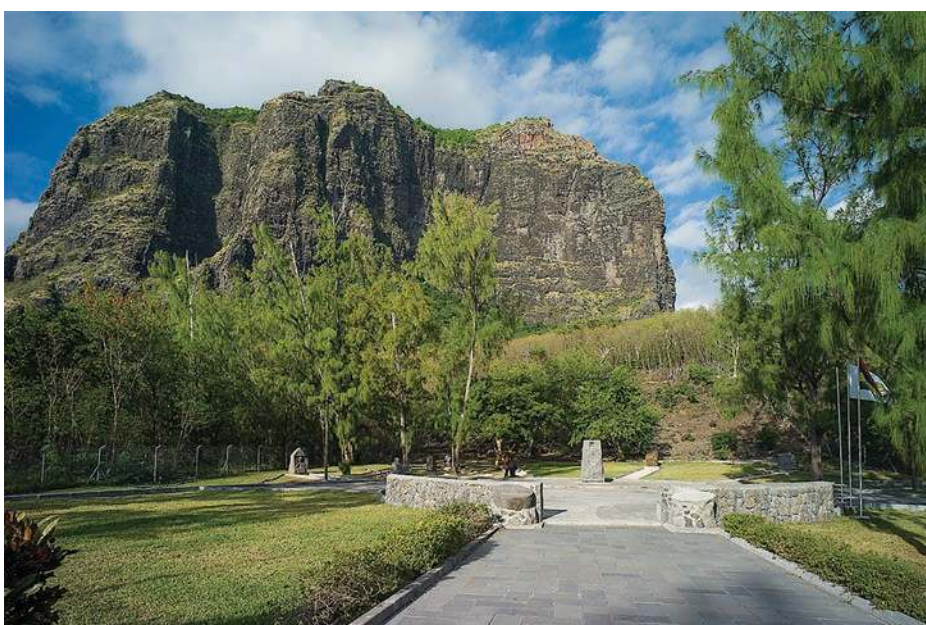


Fig 2. General view of Le Morne Cultural Landscape, historic site of marronage. Photo ©Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, used by permission.



Fig. 3. Carved stone stele. Idealized memorial to maroon Indian female slaves, Le Morne Cultural Landscape. Photo ©Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, used by permission.



Fig. 4. Memorial to African and Malagasy maroons. Le Morne Cultural landscape. Photo ©Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, used by permission.

abully has applauded UNESCO's double recognition of the intertwined histories of Indians and Africans in his native island, noting that it has enormous symbolic value and provides a concrete means of going beyond the ideologies of ethnic particularism and communalism.⁸

Concepts that recently have become attached to the study of discrete domains of human contact include cosmopolitanism, creolization, and coolitude. In a 2012 book, I called for a more flexible and complex understanding of the first two terms and argued that we might do well to think of creolization as the cosmopolitanism of the subaltern and cosmopolitanism as the creolization of the elite (*The Known* 15, 65). Torabully's coolitude is another such term, and it is increasingly used in critical approaches to the literature of indenture and migrancy. Coined on the model of negritude, coolitude is not, however, "négritude à l'indienne" (*Coolitude* 144), but a concept in line with standard ideas of creolization and the rejection of all essentialisms, except that it foregrounds the contributions of Asian peoples to the composite social identities of post-abolition societies, contributions that have all-too often been overlooked in the discussions of Atlantic social (trans) formations.

Introduced by Torabully in 1992 in his book of poetry *Cale d'étoiles, Coolitudes* and later developed as a theoretical concept, "coolitude" responded to the surge of academic interest in questions of *créolité* subsequent to the publication in 1989 of the Martinican manifesto *Éloge de la créolité* and the translation into English of Edouard Glissant's *Discours antillais (Caribbean Discourse)*. In *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (2002), Torabully explains that "coolitude"

springs in fact, from a word (coolie/indentured), which at the beginning designated an economic status, and has been broadened to encompass a human situation. Before resorting massively to coolies from India, there were experiments to bring coolies from China, Ethiopia, Brittany, even, from Africa The coolie symbolizes, in its broader definition, the possibility of building a composite identity As the vast majority of those described as coolies and who settled in ex-slave societies of the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean . . . originated in India, it would have been unwise to overlook this historical and human fact. (144)

Torabully is careful to insist that if coolitude is a concept that aims to honor India as the point of departure of the migrants, the end result, "in an ontological perspective" (147), is not the return to an essentialized or pure origin. He rejects all idealized notions of origin, pointing instead to the diversity of elements that today constitutes "the Indies or Indias": namely, the plural cultures that have emerged out of the Subcontinent and out of which have evolved complex and dynamic communities. He stresses that his "poetics of coolitude . . . should not, in any circumstances, lead to an exclusive vision of identity" (149–50). When embarking on a journey to retrieve lost fragments of memory and to reconstruct severed relationships to a territory, "one should not forget that these origins cannot be exclusive of the differences of others, whether of language, creed or culture" (149). Torabully also explains that Edouard Glissant's approach, in *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, to diversity and creolization as an unending process with unpredictable results is close to his own: "Coolitude is close to the spirit of creolization . . . Creolization

⁸ The fifth anniversary of the United Nation's recognition of the Aapravasi Ghat as a World Heritage Site was an occasion for celebrations, and Torabully made it a point to emphasize a "humanisme du divers" ("5e anniversaire"; humanism of diversity) and to stress affinities with creolization and (implicitly) with the Glissantian poetics of relation.

is more a 'structure' than a system . . . a process of identity construction which takes into account the impossibility of putting a full stop to this task" (154–55). But Torabully's multi-dimensional model of creolization differs fundamentally from the Caribbean model precisely because it takes another, Asian, starting point that foregrounds the economic and social diversity of all its actors, rather than the link to a "mother" continent as was generally the case with regard to Africa and New World creolizations. In coolitude, the emphasis is on outcomes *unrelated* to ethnicity *as such* since coolies have such diverse origins (as Ghosh's trilogy exemplifies).

In his discussion of the literary characteristics of coolitude (195ff), Torabully explains that both content and form play an important role in defining a poetics of coolitude as a thematic of exile and voyage and a conception of the world best expressed by means of a "plurivocal" (195) narrative and "baroque point of view" (200). He singles out Naipaul as the "first writer of a 'paradoxical' coolitude" (197) because of the Trinidadian's rejection of, and contempt for, his co-insular descendants of indentureship, to whom he had however given "a language, an aesthetic project" (199) in his first novels. Torabully praises in contrast Le Clézio's *La quarantaine*, which speaks of "the coolie odyssey" (211) and enables through its transcultural frames "the meeting of *imaginaires* from India, Africa, Europe, China" (211). For Torabully, this novel advances a perception of India—by the coolie and by others—that is itself irremediably modified by the voyage (211). In a 2011 blog exchange on Amitav Ghosh's website, Torabully also expresses admiration for the author of *Sea of Poppies*, praising the way he rewrites the archives of the Indian Ocean voyages with "poetic power . . . through the voices of the muffled and silenced ones," thus leading the way for new narratives of "Sinbad's ocean" that can allow for the "articulation of other imaginaries in this matrix of globalization" overlooked by the long-standing focus on the Atlantic slave trade and *its* creolized dynamics.⁹

As nerve center of the coolie trade and final destination of several central characters (of Indian, Chinese, African American, and European descent) in the *Ibis* trilogy, Mauritius is a narrative thread that runs through *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. In both volumes, Deeti sets the tone: we learn that, after being widowed, she was saved from certain death by sati and signed up to join the *girmitiyas* (indentured) travelling to the plantations of Mauritius (*Sea* 189). Her drawings serve as an alternate form of narration and insight in Ghosh's trilogy, as he successfully brings together the histories of slavery and indenture. The opening pages of *River of Smoke* evoke the historic site of the Morne Brabant, where "fugitives—or maroons as they were known in Kreol—had lasted until shortly after 1834, when slavery was outlawed in Mauritius. . . . [Many] had flung themselves off the cliffs, plunging to their deaths on the rocks below" (*River* 10). Ghosh describes with precision the history of slavery and resistance linked to that mountain:

Nowhere was the forest richer than on the Morne, but rarely, if ever, did anyone venture to climb those slopes—for the mountain was a place of sinister reputation, where hundreds, perhaps thousands of people were known to have died. Back in the days of slavery, the Morne's inaccessibility had made it an attractive place of refuge for escaped slaves, who had settled there in considerable numbers. (*River* 10)

But the Morne is not merely a monument to the Malagasy and Africans who used to hide in its forested slopes. It is also in the trilogy the site of a shrine created by

⁹ The letters and numerous comments on Ghosh's blog provide an instructive view of their relationship.

Deeti as a means of recording her ship-siblings' journey in 1838 to the island where they would settle and prosper. Deeti's "'Memory-Temple' — *Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir*" (8) is presented by Ghosh as an alternative archive of a collective history of indenture, since Deeti encourages others to add to her fresco, which she started painting on the walls of a cavern she discovered in the Morne's forest while seeking shelter, with her baby in tow, during a sudden storm that interrupted her foraging for wild bananas. Here is the opening paragraph of *River of Smoke*:

Deeti's shrine was hidden in a cliff, in a far corner of Mauritius, where the island's eastern and southern shorelines collide to form the wind-whipped dome of the Morne Brabant. The site was a geological anomaly—a cave within a spur of limestone, hollowed out by wind and water—and there was nothing like it anywhere else on the mountain. Later Deeti would insist that it wasn't chance but destiny that led her to it—for the very existence of the place was unimaginable until you had actually stepped inside it. (3)

The Morne Heritage Site is a palimpsest that evokes "the seriality of abolition [and] indenture" (Burton), and the womb-like qualities of Deeti's cavern suggest that, for Ghosh, it stands for the matrix of the new culture of the immigrant nation. Deeti is not a solitary artistic genius; she urges Neel to add his story by drawing with charcoal on the cave's walls: "You are one of our original jahaz-bhais [ship-siblings] and this is our memory-temple. Everyone who has been here has added to it—Malum Zikri, Paulette, Jodu. It is your turn now" (25).

Deeti is a true "creator of the world" in Nancy's sense: her shrine is a set of provisional and collaborative visual narratives that is "not the representation of a universe (cosmos) nor that of a here below . . . but the excess—beyond any representation of an *ethos* or of a *habitus*—of a stance by which the world stands by itself, configures itself" (47). This *visual* odyssey of the ship-siblings is a visionary and performative portrayal of history from below, cherished by the "family" through generations of ethnically diverse groups that make the island their common dwelling and multicultural nation.

In Le Clézio's *La quarantaine*, however, despite the meeting of "imaginaires" evoked approvingly by Torabully, the potential for coexistence is bleaker, and the focus is on the un-worlding of subjects by domination. The narrator sets out in 1980 to investigate the story of his great-uncle and namesake, Léon, who was banished from family memory in 1891 after he chose to follow the mixed-race Surya-vati and broke away from his colonial milieu. Having embarked on a journey back to Mauritius, and hoping to reconnect with the family patriarch who caused the ruin of their father twenty years earlier, Léon, his brother Jacques, and wife Suzanne end up instead on Flat Island, a small island off the northern coast of Mauritius, where their ship and its passengers are quarantined because of the risks associated with an on-board smallpox epidemic. Léon, who is barely twenty-one years old, falls in love with Surya, through whom he becomes aware of his complicity with colonialism—a relationship that mirrors that of Alexis and Ouma in *The Prospector*. Just as Alexis learns from Ouma, a descendant of the companions of the great Sacalavou,¹⁰ the history of slave revolts and the forms of local knowledge that allowed the maroons to survive in the forbidding natural environment of the forests of Mananava, so Léon learns from Surya and her mother the history

¹⁰ Sacalavou is a mythic counterpart to the Madagascar Merina rebel, Ratsitane. Le Clézio writes about him in *Révolutions* (433–43; 478–90; 522) and links his maroon followers to the site of today's Aapravasi Ghat, which served as a landing point for the servile population of all origins during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (522).

of native resistance, beginning with the Sepoy rebellion in Cawnpore in 1857. But, unlike Ghosh's female characters, Ouma and Surya disappear from view. At the end of *Le chercheur d'or*, "Ouma est partie" (327; "Ouma is gone," 325). Although Alexis has learned to detach himself from the material world and gives up the search for gold, Ouma ends up with her brother in the migrants' camp from which they will soon be deported. Alexis is the only one who benefits from their encounter (see Lohka). The potential for transformation that is present in the middle section of the book, in which Ouma tells her own story, is never fulfilled. Ouma's subaltern voice is framed by Alexis's narrative, and once she has played her role as instrument of his enlightenment, she returns to a prison camp, away from the freedom of the sea and the stars that she had shared with him. In the end, new boundaries emerge and other forms of confinement are put in place.

On one level, this is a conclusion without romantic delusions about the prospects of successful mixing: the lure of the other is shown to be but the desire for an illusory possibility of meaningful transformation. "Alors tout est inventé, illusoire, comme la vie qui continue autrement quand on poursuit un rêve, nuit après nuit" (457; so all is invention and illusion, just as life carries on otherwise when you pursue a dream night after night), as the authorial Léon says of his search for the past. If, in contrast to Ouma's fate in *The Prospector*, Surya and the first Léon leave together at the conclusion of *La quarantaine*, this departure is represented as a death sentence, since he is summarily eliminated from his family's history, and even his photograph disappears from the grandmother's album (456). Coming to Mauritius in the 1980s in search of that history, the second Léon is stumped in his initial quest to understand his great uncle's story. He becomes instead the transcriber of another story, that of his great-aunt Anna, who hands over to him the notebook in which she wrote, at eighteen, the secret account of her love for Sita, whose arranged marriage ended their relationship. Hers is another failed cross-racial encounter, but one that inspires the imaginative recreation of a world in which Sita might have been the daughter of the first Léon and Surya (459)—a plausible scenario that plays into the Faulknerian condition of white Mauritian families, their racial secrets repeatedly excised from historical records but often preserved by women, like Anna, who are the keepers of these memories. The blind aunt Catherine in *Revolutions* is another version of Anna and teaches her nephew Jean Marro about the past "dont [elle] était la dernière gardienne" (52; of which she was the last keeper). Le Clézio's Indian Ocean cycle thus tends to position its author-narrator as a male heir to these female keepers of memory, bearing a responsibility for the transmission of a cultural past that has been willfully erased from the record but is as alive and present as the numerous material traces through which it survives in the present.

In her careful Lévinasian reading of *La quarantaine*, Karen Levy demonstrates that "questions concerning eros, ethics, and the feminine assume different configurations" in this novel and that the Rimbaldian "I is another" informs the first Léon's encounter with the "Lévinasian Other" (267), who enables his transformation by eliciting desire for "something outside himself, utterly foreign, which he cannot encompass and master" (267). This desire is not the nostalgic longing for return that motivates his brother Jacques. Rather, for Levy, it is the moral imperative of justice and solidarity that sets Léon on this other course, just as we might understand Le Clézio's creative project to be the result of a summons to write *other-*

wise and to compel his readers to read and live otherwise in accordance with the meanings “at work beyond the work [*à l'oeuvre au delà de l'oeuvre*]” (Nancy 54).

But, in contradistinction to Levy's hopeful conclusion, I propose that Léon experiences, like Alexis in *The Prospector*, a sense of complete self-dispossession that results from the de(con)struction of his world, the becoming *immonde* of that colonial world by means of its simultaneous un-worlding and re-worlding as an abject, dishonorable, and ignominious one. When considered together, the two novels communicate a somber view of the actual possibilities of change and exchange for Le Clézio's characters of both genders. By contrast, Ghosh communicates a sense of unending differentiation and becoming, a *mondanisation* that summons the reader to a world that is truly a “multiplicity of worlds” in the making and analogous to known forms of successful, ongoing creolization. Caught between the pessimism of Le Clézio and the optimism of Ghosh, a reader is thus left with the option of willing into actuality a world that does not foreclose the representation—and fictional invention without nostalgia or idealization—of the people missing from History.

Harvard University

Works Cited

- Alpers, Edward A. *The Indian Ocean in World History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2014. Print.
- Anonymous. Martian Spoken Here. River of Smoke. Web. <<http://mauricianismes.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/river-of-smoke/>>.
- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. New York: Verso, 2013. Print.
- Argand, Catherine, and Carole Vantroys. “Le Clézio N° 1.” *Lire* 230 (1994): 22–23. Print.
- Association Le Clézio. “Bibliographie critique.” Web. <<http://www.associationleclezio.com/ressources/bibliographiecritique.html>>.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *In Search of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity P, 1999. Print.
- Benhabib, Sheila. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Bose, Sugata. *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in The Age of Global Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. Rev. of *The Interrogation* and *La Fièvre*, by J.-M.G. Le Clézio. *The Partisan Review* 33.1 (1966): 128–32. Print.
- . Rev. of *The Book of Flights*, by J.-M.G. Le Clézio. *New York Times Book Review* 30 Jan. 1972: 75, 103. Print.
- Burton, Antoinette. “Amitav Ghosh's World Histories from Below.” *History of the Present* 2.1 (2012): 71–77. Print.
- Carter, Marina, and Khal Torabully. *Coolitude. An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*. London: Anthem, 2002. Print.
- Cassin, Barbara. *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*. Paris: Seuil/Robert, 2004. Print.
- Chenniappan R., and R. Saravana Suresh. “Postmodern Traits in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh.” *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 2.2 (2011). Web. <www.the-criterion.com>.
- Desai, Gaurav. *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination*. New York: Columbia UP, 2013. Print.

- Devarrieux, Claire. "J.-M.G. Le Clézio: 'Écrire ajoute des jours à ma vie'." *Libération* 26 Mar. 2014. Web. <http://www.liberation.fr/livres/2014/03/26/ecrire-ajoute-des-jours-a-ma-vie_990470>.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Print.
- Edwards, Thomas R. "The Real Thing." *New York Review of Books* 9 Mar. 1972. Web. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1972/mar/09/the-real-thing/?insrc=toC>>.
- Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. Print.
- Fletcher, Lisa. "Reading the Postcolonial Island in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*." *Island Studies Journal* 6.1 (2011): 3–16. Print.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "Blog." Web. <<http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=1210>>.
- . "Confessions of a Xenophile." *Chimurenga* 14 (2009): 35–41. Print.
- . Interview. *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 2.1 (2012). Web. <<http://www.historyofthepresent.org/2.1/interview.html>>.
- . *In an Antique Land*. 1992. London: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- . *River of Smoke*. London: John Murray, 2011. Print.
- . *Sea of Poppies*. London: John Murray, 2008. Print.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. 1981. Trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989. Print.
- . *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996. Print.
- Hawes, Elizabeth. "The Price of Colonialism." *New York Times* 30 Aug. 2009: 11. Rev. of the 2009 trans. of *Désert* by J.-M.G. Le Clézio. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/books/review/Hawes-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.
- Ho, Engseng. "Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46.2 (2004): 210–46. Print.
- Hofmeyr, Isabel. "The Complicating Sea. The Indian Ocean as Method." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33.2 (2013): 150–52. Print.
- Joignet, Frédéric. Interview with Le Clézio. "Coexister, c'est comprendre ce qui peut offenser l'autre." *Le Monde*, 12 Sept. 2014. Web. <http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2014/09/11/coexister-c-est-comprendre-ce-qui-peut-offenser-l-autre_4486179_3246.html>.
- Larson, Pier M. *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.
- Le Clézio, J.-M. G. *Le chercheur d'or*. Paris: Gallimard, 1985.
- . *The Prospector*. Trans. Carol Marks. Boston: Godine, 1993. Print.
- . *L'extase matérielle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1967. Print.
- . *La quarantaine*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996. Print.
- . *Le rêve mexicain ou la pensée interrompue*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.
- . *The Mexican Dream or, The Interrupted Thought of Ameridian Civilizations*. Trans. Teresa Laverder Fagan. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. Print.
- . *Révolutions*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003. Print.
- . *Ritournelle de la faim*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008. Print.
- Levy, Karen D. "Elsewhere and Otherwise: Lévinasian Eros and Ethics in Le Clézio's *La quarantaine*." *Orbis Litterarum* 56 (2001): 255–75. Print.
- Lionnet, Françoise. "Universalisms and Francophonies." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 12.2–3 (2009): 203–21. Print.
- . *The Known and the Uncertain: Creole Cosmopolitics of the Indian Ocean*. Mauritius: L'Atelier d'écriture, 2012. Print.
- . "Shipwrecks, Slavery, and the Challenge of Global Comparison: From Fiction to Archive in the Colonial Indian Ocean." *Comparative Literature* 64.4 (2012): 446–61. Print.

- Lohka, Eileen. "Les femmes évanescences du cycle mauricien: entretien avec Françoise Lionnet." *Les Cahiers Le Clézio* 6 (2013): 113–23. Print.
- Martin, Bronwen. *The Fiction of J.-M.G. Le Clézio: A Postcolonial Reading*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2012. Print.
- Mauguière, Bénédicte, and Bruno Thibault. "Préface. Le Clézio: La Francophonie et la question postcoloniale." *Nouvelles études francophones* 20.2 (2005): 9–15. Print.
- Miran, Jonathan. *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009. Print.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. 2002. Trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. New York: SUNY P, 2007. Print.
- Pearson, Michael. *The Indian Ocean*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Peyre, Henry. "Adam and Evil in The Garden." Rev. of *The Interrogation*, by J.-M.G. Le Clézio. *Saturday Review* 31 Oct. 1964: 52. Print.
- Oxford English Dictionary. "coolie, *n.*" Web. <<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/40991>>.
- Quayson, Ato. "Introduction: Postcolonial Literature in a Changing Historical Frame." *Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. 1–29. Print.
- Ray, Sanjeeta. "Towards a Planetary Reading of Postcolonial and American Imaginative Eco-Geographies." *A Companion to Comparative Literature*. Ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. 421–36. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. *Explorations in Connected History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Torabully, Khal. *Cale d'étoiles. Coolitudes*. St-Denis-Réunion: Azalées, 1992. Print.
- . "5e anniversaire du Ghat." Web. <<http://www.indereunion.net/IREV/articles/khal6.htm>>.
- UNESCO World Heritage. "Aapravasi Ghat." Web. <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1227/>>. "Le Morne Cultural Landscape." <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1259/>>.
- Vantroys, Carol. "Elu 'Meilleur écrivain' de langue française." Interview with Le Clézio. *Lire* 230 (1994). Rpt. on Web. <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/elu-meilleur-ecrivain-de-langue-francaise_815186.html>.
- Vink, Markus P. M. "Indian Ocean Studies and the 'New Thalassology.'" *Journal of Global History* 2.1 (2007): 41–62. Print.
- Young, Robert J.C. "World Literature and Postcolonialism." *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. Ed. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir. New York: Routledge, 2012. 213–22. Print.
- Zanganeh, Lila Azam. "Une oeuvre mal comprise aux Etats-Unis." *Le Monde* 10 Oct. 2008. Web. <http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2008/10/10/une-oeuvre-mal-comprise-aux-etats-unis_1105442_3260.html>.