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ARTICLE

Cross-cultural Labyrinths in the Literatures of the Indian Ocean

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Abstract
The insular Indian oceanic space is distinguished by a long history of migrations, encounters, conflicts, exchanges, interbreeding, and interculturality. Violence and negotiation lie at the heart of their historical, anthropological, and linguistic processes. The literatures of the Indian Ocean islands, in particular, articulate their representations, their fictional universes and speeches, as well as their modes of writing, with a perpetual interrogation about travels, meetings, frontiers, which constitute the ways of living in places and telling about them. Composed on the basis of dialogue and intertextuality in order to account for complex worlds, they also house ghosts which make them labyrinthine. Experiences peculiar to each society also connect them with the global history of colonial predation and disobedience, migrations, and exchanges, as well as intercultural relationships. From this point of view, such literatures allow one to read the labyrinthine and spectral insertion of the colonial world into European literatures. This paper is based on a French-language Indian oceanic corpus and aims to put forward a political reading (in the sense of Jacques Rancière) of the aesthetics of intercultural meetings and of its unplanned effects.

Keywords: Cross-cultural; Literature; Indian Ocean

Indian Ocean spaces: mooring-places

In the critical and theoretical discourse relating to Francophone and postcolonial literatures, it is current practice to give emphasis to notions of hybridity, of encounters – conflictive or otherwise – of creolization and even syncretism (Vergès & Martimoutou 2005; Bonniol 2013). The former paradigms of resistance, rejection, contestation, and response, judged to be too Manichean, have been replaced by the more nuanced one of negotiation and intercultural dialogue. The literatures of the Indian Ocean region do not escape this reorientation of reading, all the more because they are no longer simply considered within the restrictive and limiting framework of a relationship between

former colonies and the erstwhile colonial power, but are more and more relocated within the domain of an ocean which, even more so than the Atlantic, is characterized by a long history of migrations, cross-cultural encounters, the creation of hybrid languages like Swahili and the various Creoles, for example, and of newly assumed cultures that are also hybrid, blended, and in perpetual evolution and adaptation to the conditions of social and ethnological encounter, whether this occurs within an asymmetric frame or otherwise.

From this perspective, linear conceptions of time as well as smooth geometrical apprehensions of space give way to the idea of temporal co-presences in the apparently contemporary moment, and superimposed or intersecting spatial strata on the plane of apparent singularity. It is within this apprehension of polymorphous and polycentric universes but which are all intermingled that the categories of migration, encounter, transitions, and boundaries are being rethought.

The idea of co-presence becomes more complex if one takes into account the inevitable blending of ethnicities over the course of history, a blending which incessantly increases the diversity of ancestries, of points of origin, of associations with the profane and sacred spheres, with what is held to be 'pure' and 'impure'. To inhabit or go about within a creole domain necessarily implies in those inhabitants a multiple consciousness of spaces and temporalities, an apprehension both of the existence of boundaries and their permeability, the certainty that 'authenticity' is founded on impurity, intermeshing, chance.

Myths and legends – those of one's preferential ancestors as well of those ancestral myths that others have chosen or promoted – along with their folk tales, are always read anew or produced as a function of the places of settlement, and conflict with, dialogue with, or intersect with the other narratives that are to hand.

But this acceptance of the multiple nature of origins demands that attention is also brought to the interstices, the places where are found the ghosts of what haunts both space, time, and language, thereby allowing precisely for the conflictive articulation of that multiple aspect. Thenceforth, the literary texts of these regions, under the guise of projecting ways of reading or perceiving these encompassed spaces and mastered temporalities, work in reality – often unrealized by their narrative or ideological programmes – towards proposing fictional universes: in these latter, the apparently known, the apparently described, the apparently related is revealed as a universe of hieroglyphs and palimpsests haunted by phantoms of all kinds – implanted there most often by the violent history of slave-hunting and colonial encounters – which are always capable of transforming them, or at least of changing their meanings.

The Indian Ocean, which has known different projections on to the global stage associated with pre-European empires, with slavery and the slave trade, then with the colonial empires, is not a homogeneous world but vast space of encounters, exchange and conflict (Chaudhuri 1991; Hall 1996; Pearson 2004; Beaujard 2012). This cross-cultural reality of the ocean *qua* ocean has scarcely ever been acknowledged in European travel accounts. The very names given to these are problematical: 'Voyage in African seas', 'Voyage to the South Seas' … such were the titles given to these accounts. 'Seas' plural instead of 'Ocean'; 'Southern Lands' instead of Indian Ocean worlds. Whereas the notions of the 'Mediterranean world', the 'Atlantic world', the 'Pacific world', the 'Caribbean world' have passed into current usage, the idea of an 'Indian Ocean world' does not yet seem to be self-evident. Thus, the writers of India,

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the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Reunion are most often linked back to their respective countries and are not perceived as being part of an Indian Ocean composite.

The societies of the Indian Ocean are nevertheless made up of cultures which are both global in their linkage and mosaical in their form. This reality, which inhabits the structure of all the Indian Ocean worlds, is particularly perceptible in the Creole spaces. These latter are characterized, in a fashion both explicit and visible, by conflictive encounters and negotiations which are constantly renewed and which continuously transform the space 'in-common'. At the same time, the process of creolization does not erase the links with the spaces whence the inhabitants of these Creole worlds originated; their modalities are transformed through a permanently reinvented and re-formulated labour, which passes by reconstructions of memory and reconfigurations of the image-space. Paradoxically, the Creole space becomes the place where the plural spaces of origin, which are heterogeneous one to another, can be rethought in a dynamic fashion. The spaces of origin, in effect, the six complex worlds from which the Creole cultures of the Indian Ocean are constituted – Africa, East Asia, South Asia, Europe, Indian Ocean islands (Comoros, Madagascar) and the Indian Ocean Muslim world – participate in the construction of Creole worlds which, in return, re-formulate the way they grasp themselves and their meaning through their cross-fertilization by fragmentation. In other words, these societies, born out of migration, slavery, European colonization and the erasure of the cultures of origin – hence 'atavistic' in Édouard Glissant's words – have built themselves out of that very loss which founded them, by giving that cultural loss a different significance and creating a dialectic around its foundation. They have constructed themselves both through a practice of consigning to the past the notion of 'origin' and, in the same movement, through a return to these same origins in blended form both in their practices and their imaginative spaces in the Creole location.

The Indian Ocean creole literatures constantly problematize these themes. They scrutinize the environment and processes of location within it, the diverse migrations and their modalities (both diachronically and synchronically), the relationship with other worlds and with the ocean which separates or brings closer. In a certain way, literature may appear as the metonymy of trans-oceanic movement and of a permanent shuttling back and forth. The creole island may thus be imagined as a mooring-place which authorizes all journeys, all deviations, all sense of loss and all hopes, but also all reconstructions of the relationship with self, with others, with fellows, with history, with memory, with the complex labyrinths of ethnic and cultural heritages … and with the phantoms which arise out of them.

The processes of creolization lead those bound up by them to constantly revisit the meanings of their origins and their historical evolution, but also those of the creole environment itself. If the awareness of origins fades in terms of an awareness, history and the environment accord it a spectral presence which contributes towards etching it as a disturbing familiarity not only in the creole space but in all the spaces to which the migrations lead. Each time, there is an absence which is striving to express itself, a lack which is straining to be filled, a palimpsest to be made visible, a catastrophe to be declared. And each time, there is a vacillation in the discourses of foundation, as if the very possibility of inhabiting this space implied acknowledging these spectres so as to appease them for the moment through the systematic incorporation into

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the Creole body of multiplicity, polyphony, multi-lingualism, hybridity of language, conflictive encounters, and foundational migrations. In a strange way, these spectres and the migrations end up creating the possibility of an insular Creole autochthony in these islands that were without initial indigeneity. The literary text becomes an archive and a tool for etching the faint traces of the past, of those long gone, of ghosts: an archive of the forgotten haunted by absent memory. The fragments of memories restitched together, reconstructed, reinvented, the re-imagined incidences of naming, the fragmented legends, the longed-for myths restore a place to those phantoms in the labyrinths of the texts. Such myths build non-linear spaces for their circulation and dissemination, self-enveloping or spiralling temporalities where the absences and gaps are reactivated in their encounter with the here and the elsewhere, the past and the present.

Phantoms and labyrinths of the Creole islands

In his collection, *D'Île en Ille*, the Reunion poet André Robèr (2010: 60), who had left his home island in his late adolescent years, wrote thus about it:

> Here everyone came by boat
> Here everyone knows someone who came by boat
> Here everyone knows someone who knows someone who came by boat
> Here everyone knows someone who suffered from coming by boat […]
> Here everyone lives as if in a different world
> Here everyone knows someone who lives as if in a different world
> Here everyone knows someone who knows someone who lives as if in a different world
> Here everyone knows someone who knows someone who suffers from having lived in a different world.

This theme of coming by boat, which renders for ever unknowable the world of origins and ungraspable the world in which one lives clearly symbolizes the difficult, grievous, and complex relationship which the inhabitants of the Creole islands, having arrived from all parts but lacking certain origins, maintain with a universe which, reversing the myth of harmony across cultures, is set out, felt and written as a universe of traps and snares, where no visa is ever granted for crossing the frontiers of the interior. Every crossing is shown to threaten a pitfall.

Thus, Mauritian and Reunion stories constantly insist on the fact that the island spaces are haunted by 'bebets', wandering souls, he- and she-devils. In any landscape that might be thought of as beautiful, terror is at work and is ready to rise up at any moment. This atavistic violence is projected as foundational, present since the island began. In 'Pou in solédy an pliss', Daniel Honoré (2004: 9-14) imagines how the island of Reunion was created. It was born out of the jealousy of the sea which could not bear to see that her twin sister, the sky[1], was not only more beautiful than she, but also was bedecked with magnificent jewels like the sun, the moon, and the stars. The two sisters were the daughters of the earth and the 'Father of Oneness'. The sea therefore

[1]In the text, 'sky' is a female character.

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begged her mother to also make her a gift of a sun. But with the earth's refusal, who declared to her daughter that the Father of Oneness had created only one sun, the sea decided to violently tear off a part of the land to make her own jewel, her own private sun: thus was the island born of a seizure, a mutilation, a tearing away. Behind its beauty this original violence still lies hidden, and the island retains traces of it which are widespread. One of the consequences is that the world which is presented to the characters can at any moment offer a passage to another world, possibly wondrous in nature; but very swiftly this open gateway becomes entwined into a labyrinth in which various monsters lurk, as one can read in a tale by Anne Cheynet (2013: 31). Every exit from the labyrinth opens on to new labyrinths which are present even at the heart of the most peaceful of worlds. The most well-marked paths lead to chasms or caverns from which at any moment there may emerge *Granmerkals, Grandiabs*, or any other entity from elsewhere, having crossed the fluid boundary separating the world of the living from the world of the dead, and capable of inflicting the inverse journey on the characters – or even worse, halting them on the very threshold itself and turning them into the living dead. In the most ornate of flowering gardens exist species that open the way to a universe of sorcery, spells, and magic. The tales emphasize the capacity of any space to be transformed into something different, to create boundaries within its apparent homogeneity. These same themes are present in novels. *Notes des derniers jours* by Pierre-Louis Rivière describes a home garden in the heart of the city of Saint-Denis. The narrator insists on a distinction between the inner courtyard and what is the 'real garden', but the 'pleasure' aspect of the garden is quite secondary; what counts are the medicinal plants, the aromatic herbs and spices, which constitute a *landscape apart* concealed beneath the domesticated space, for these plants are links into other universes, to another story of journeys (Rivière 2002: 26)[2]. Most often the garden around Creole huts is considered as an element of their courtyard. It is for this reason that this space of varied functions allows for all transformations and all metaphorical associations. In *Faims d'enfance* of Axel Gauvin, the bunch of wild flowers gathered in the fields by Ary, one of the school children and brother of Lina whom the young narrator is in love with, which he wants to give to his teacher changes into a purée, some stewed fruit, a soup (Gauvin 1987: 58-59).

Strangely, this postcolonial awareness of the misapprehension which characterizes the relations with the environment and that intuition about the phantoms which haunt it, so contributing to the creation of boundaries and metamorphosing passages into labyrinths, was already latent in the texts of the colonial period.

In the first half of the 19th century, Louis Héry, at the same time author of the first Reunion Creole fables[3], published his *Explorations à l'intérieur de l'Isle Bourbon* and pioneered the literary description of the Reunion landscape. This landscape is systematically presented as a fearful place. It is so in itself, because of the many gorges, precipices, ravines, slippery slopes, craggy summits, or the frequent mists which cloak the crests. But the tale in particular confronts the narrator with the terrors produced

[2]This type of description is also frequently found in Creole-language novels, such as those of Daniel Honoré, *Shemin Bracanot, Marceline Doub-Ker,* and *Vativien,* or in that of Graziella Leveneur, *Dofé sou la pay kan*.

[3]The first Indian Ocean Creole tales were published by the Mauritian François Chrestien in 1820 under the title *Essais d'un bobre africain.*

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by the ghosts who haunt what is less a landscape than what subsists of a tract associated with the hunting, pursuit, and capture of fugitives, and their desperate resistance. It is less the dizzying drops of the precipices or the difficulty of the mountain ascents which terrify Héry as the presence, impalpable but diffusely reactivated by tracts of land passed through, of the fugitive slaves called the 'Marrons'. Every cave where the rambler rests is shown to be the place where Marrons were massacred during the great conflict which pitted them against the 'Marron hunters', or else a place of refuge for them, or their tomb. At the end of the 19th century, Jules Hermann followed Héry's lead in his manner concerning these palimpsest and labyrinthine landscapes. In *Fondation Quartier Saint-Pierre*, published in 1898, he constructs an etymological reverie based on an epistemology of traces of the past, of passings-through, of palimpsests. For him, the present condition of the land and of its relief, just as of the language, cannot be understood other than as signs of a different state of the world, an older state, but which coexists with the space-time of the present day. From that perspective, real knowledge can only be a knowledge of the 'debris'. Considered more precisely, according to him, the place-names are haunted by phantoms, names that are of Malagasy form, a form which alone is capable of accounting for the truth of the place. Even more, this Malagasy nomenclature reveals the ecological catastrophe which befell the island consequent upon the arrival of white Europeans, solely preoccupied by despoliation and profit. One must therefore be able to retrace the boundaries of the space-time while opening passages into it. It is only this etymological effort which will allow for an escape from the labyrinth of signs in which the reader of the place-names becomes lost, and for an understanding of what is hidden behind these names[4]. The erasure of the real meaning reveals the intention of the masters to establish their sole legitimacy of occupation by denying that right to others. The drawing of the language boundaries here has a clearly political and ideological weighting. But this operation reveals in reality their great terror, and in particular it does not fully erase the former naming; it rather ensures its survival as a palimpsest, and those who gave the former names – the Malagasy 'Marrons' – as phantoms. The place-naming itself becomes a labyrinth where the choice of one pathway leaves latent the possibility of taking another. For example, the fact that François Mussard, the notorious fugitive-slave hunter, eradicated the hidden camps of the Marrons on the Piton Maravalavou has not prevented the unanticipated return of the erased presence in the new place-name 'Plaine des Cafres', Kaffirs Plain, the plain of the Blacks.

This jumbled labyrinth of periods, spaces, and names is one of the reasons for the fear which runs through the colonial texts. Marius-Ary Leblond (1946: 118) in the first half of the 20th century projected an epic, mythical and mystified history of Reunion in which this terror is explicitly put forward as a structural aspect linked to the conditions of settlement and the racialized organization of the colonial spaces since its

[4]'The name of Provisioning Area is one which I discovered in the old documents of the East India Company: I have pointed out that this is the literal translation of the Malagasy word "Mahavel", a common word which has remained applied to one of the sections of the Rivière Dabord. From another point of view, this Provisioning Area was also named Saint-Étienne, well before the slave-hunting boundary was extended beyond the river of that name; in Malagasy, Tsintetena or Tsinteteny means an area one does not go through, just as the neighbouring gorges were named Tsilaos, from Tsilaosa, meaning region that the fugitive slaves do not have to leave because the whites did not come there' (Hermann 2012: 371-372).

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origins. The short story entitled 'Cafrine' (Leblond 2005) offers a prominent illustration of this. In the classic colonial discourse, the human universe is split in two: on one side are the Blacks, creatures of nature whose world is that of the night; on the other the Whites, creatures of culture who live in daylight. The radical opposition between the day and the night certainly allows the narrator to circumscribe the image space of the Black but, *a contrario*, it also detaches the universes from each other; more precisely it dis-subordinates the world of the dominated from that of the dominators. More seriously from the colonial perspective, it gives sanction to the dream for the former of a world liberated from the presence of the Whites. What is by day the space of harassing labour transforms by night into an aesthetic space of liberation, a world of pleasure fulfilment, the inverse of what constitutes the enjoyment of pleasure and objects of aesthetic appreciation for the masters. Such a nocturnal space opens up the possibility of consequential associations, of a story different from that fixed by the discourse of dominance: 'There are places to be sure where people gather who linger in the evening to tell stories and dance around a big cooking pot in which food for all is boiling. It was their gatherings that had to be sought beneath a surround of trees or in caves up ravines' (Leblond 1905: 265).

Inhabiting the space. It was indeed that which was fundamental: to cease being transported from one place to another where none has ever been one's own; to find one's own place, one's habitat, one's garden. A text like 'Cafrine', perhaps without its own authors realizing it, points in the fearfulness of the narration to these other possibilities relating to a garden of origins, but also to various implicit gardens which exist in potential state beneath the well-ordered garden by which the dominance is so spectacularly manifested.

In the inter-war period, in the face of this dread engendered by the insular space, of this difficulty in organizing it and mastering it, of investing it both with a meaning and a genealogy that were reassuring, Jules Hermann, in his *Révélations du Grand Océan* and in *Fondations du Quartier Saint-Pierre*, will replace the violent ghosts of the Marrons with the just as spectral but civilizing presence of the Lemurians (Hermann 1927, 1990). Reunion, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles were the supposed remnants of a sunken continent named Lemuria. The inhabitants of this mythical continent brought from the south knowledge and culture to the world. The Creole 'natural' space becomes the aesthetic creation of these extraordinary artists who fashioned the mountains, gorges, and cliffs of the island. What was terrifying turns into the result of a very ancient aesthetic endeavour. The dread is pushed back even further in that the Malagasy – and hence the Marrons – in this mythical scenario become the direct heirs, the closest heirs at all events, of the ancient Lemurians.

Another attempt at allaying the dread or pacifying it can be observed in the novel of Marguerite-Hélène Mahé, published in 1951, entitled *Sortilèges creoles: Eudora ou l'île enchantée*. Here, reversing the usual colonial discourse, the novel strives to construct pathways which would allow a peaceable encounter between the former masters and the former slaves, between the past and the present, the disturbing space of the Heights and that of the Low Places. The female characters, Eudora, her ancestress Sylvie, and the slave Kalla clear the obstructed passages which were transforming the world into an inextricable network of labyrinths. By their doing so, the passageway becomes the place where the experience of one's own otherness and of that of the

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other can occur. The female opener of these ways, the explorer of the labyrinths, is transformed into a passer-on of memory and life.

But in order to achieve this, a long effort would have been needed to attempt –without really achieving it – to lay the phantoms of the slaves and the Marrons by granting them a burial which would allow them to wholly inhabit the Creole space[5]. It would have also needed reinserting the secret ethnic mixings in genealogies that too long had been whitened, abolishing the secret hiding places lying deep within the characters, separating the subject from his double, restoring the boundaries in time in order to open sure passageways in the contemporary space, passageways which 'creolize' the origins and the mythologies on which they are founded[6].

Labyrinthine migrations and encounters

It is also from this perspective that the Indian Ocean texts confront the difficult question of place as a migratory space, or inversely, of migration itself as place. The literary work of the Mauritian Marcel Cabon provides an interesting example of this, in particular in the way in which the author, who is Creole in the Mauritian sense, that is to say of African descent, negotiates his relationship with the Indian world, both in the manner by which it has become creolized in Mauritius and such as he perceives it in India (see Ramharai & Jean-François 2014). In this sense, Cabon is literally a weaver: one observes in his work a back-and-forth movement between Mauritian visions of India that are multiple, complex and intertwined, alongside an Indian vision of Mauritius. Beyond the frontiers, the two universes interpenetrate.

If one overlays *Le Rendez-vous de Lucknow*, the account of a journey Cabon himself made to India, with his novel *Namaste*, everything happens as if the novel's protagonist, Ram, the Mauritian farmer, steeped in the legends and gods of India whose incarnation he has brought about in the land of his arrival, was in return himself becoming incarnated in India. The ghost of the Mauritian space, having indigenized on the island the texts of his ancestors, returns to permeate the expression of Cabon as a Creole traveller through the Indian space. This back-and-forth movement, this passing to and fro between legends, stories, and characters is revelatory of the manner by which both worlds and their peoples on either side of the intervening ocean become creolized.

The Mauritian/Creole Indian world or the Indian Mauritian/Creole world which is narrated and expressed in *Namaste* – a world which Cabon carried with him to India – is above all an oral one, a world penetrated throughout by the breath of the word. This foregrounding of the spoken word as generator of the narrative, and the importance of the narrative in relation to the other aspects of fictional writing, may certainly connote an Indian matrix for the manner of expression in the writing of a story which takes place in Mauritius. But this primordial orality reflects as well the status of the spoken

[5]However, the burial of the former slave Kalla is paid for at a steep price: the white Creole, Gérard de Nadal, takes her place in the chasm from where, a century later, the skeleton of Kalla is cast out. The abyssal earth of Reunion demands a new ghost, which will risk relaunching endlessly the process which the novel sought to bring to an end.

[6]For a very enlightening analysis of this novel from a perspective of textual psychoanalysis, see Cassirame 2014.

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word in the universe of the Creole folk-tale. In a certain fashion, in the expressive poetics of the novel, the modalities of oral relation derived from ancient India meet those forged in the Creole space, through the practices of Creole story-telling. The whole of the story resembles a montage, an interlinked chain of spoken words whose original speaker one never discovers. The story becomes attenuated as the words pass from one to another, as a function of memory, of recollections, of encounters, bestriding boundaries which ceaselessly form and dissolve. But the deconstruction of the origin of the spoken tale does not render this uncertain and without basis. On the contrary it offers up the spoken word to be shared, to be circulated, to be taken up again; it makes of it a possibility for each and everyone. It is the very inscription of the possibility of communication and of a knowledge discourse about a land where communication and knowledge are normally controlled and dependent on positions of social, linguistic and racial dominance. In standing against this latter, the possibility of the collective becomes here the sign of translatable singularity.

What allows the space to be inhabited is the realization that this space, in its complexity and its infinite openness which allows the circulation of all things, of dialogism and polyphony, is the world. But this is made possible only if the spectre, the phantom, the ghost are integrated as the condition for being inhabited. Nevertheless, it is a question here of a non-fantastic spectrality, one without horror, without dread, which lends authority to the speech about the world and constructs persons as speaking subjects.

Histoire d'Ashok et d'autres personnages de moindre importance by Amal Sewtohul (2001) puts forward another way of imagining the questioning of boundaries. It involves restoring and giving value to those who are considered by the dominant discourse to be the 'withouts': without voice, without value, without wealth, without a future, without importance. The whole novel presents the compartmentalization of the characters in terms of their ethnic assignment and their difficulty to escape from this, to get out of this enclosure. However, the chapter dedicated to the young Vassou comes to deconstruct this reading. Vassou in fact, a young Tamil adolescent, will surmount his existential malaise through a dream journey called up by Léonard, an old Black Creole sorcerer, who was a friend of his now dead grandfather Manikom. This journey through time and space will allow him to escape the ethnic boundaries and to discover the ties of solidarity which bind together in Mauritian history all those who have been exiled, excluded, subordinated; all those who have rebelled against their manner of assignation and their domination and who have struggled to affirm their human dignity: Marrons, revolutionaries of all countries, migrants arrived from everywhere, exiles of all nations, the colonized of all empires. This novel is symptomatic of what is at play in the Creole worlds. The cross-cultural space – the home space in effect – is formed through a dialectic between intimate spaces and shared spaces, out of which can arise a world that is held in common but is differently bestridden. One can become an alien to oneself, an intimate stranger while being familiar to others. Present-day migrations lead to the projection of other narratives in which there emerge figures of self as alien to self and to others, where the cross-cultural migrant enters into an opaque relationship with the rootedness of that interculturality, where the one who has become alien to himself confronts his initial interculturality with that of the indigenous person who, in response, discovers his own.

Thereupon, the cross-cultural question intersects with the one which asks what it means to present as alien in terms of being from beyond the integrated space.

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Two novels in particular address this specific problematic. *Les Voyages et aventures de Sanjay, explorateur mauricien des Anciens Mondes* by the same Amal Sewtohul (2009) and *Creuse, ta tombe* by the Reunion writer Jean-Louis Robert (2006)[7]. The title of the latter's novel takes to its ultimate point of recession the yawning intercultural gulf of the migrant deported against his will[8], whose devastated life is henceforth left aside. In this specific case, everything about the migrant's life reflects back to the primary dispossession, that of the African slave trade; individuals are no longer anything more than impossibilities of meaning. Here, the impossibility of situating oneself in time and in space impedes any relationship with oneself and with others. A migration of this sort, experienced as a deportation, ultimately makes any cross-cultural negotiation impossible. There remains no other outcome but madness and the radical erosion of any possibility of inhabiting a space, whether arising from a primary indigeneity or through encounters. The narrators, the characters, the torn, shattered voices of the novel make an attempt to travel through times and spaces, from the slave period to present-day France; in reality they remain blocked, without possibility of transmission, of succession, of inheritance except through the pure fantasy of the never-coming impossible purity. If, according to Saïd, thinking the world comes about from the concreteness of the relationships which have taken place and which continue to take place from out of one's own place in it, what happens when this place has ceased to take place?

Amal Sewotohul's novel seems to offer a more reassuring vision of intercultural migration and the migrating aspect of interculturality. The island of Mauritius in this novel is presented as the very locus of the cross-cultural, of exchange and of a shared world. A certain number of details, nevertheless, come to perturb this fine orderliness. The title, which plays with those of European voyage narratives to the 'new worlds' and with novels of adventure, contains the hint of some disturbance to come out of the narration and representation. As well as to Europe, the *old worlds* also refer to the old Asian civilizations, Indian, Chinese, Tibetan. But these latter are read – in a clearly derisive and parodic manner – through the Orientalist representations of a mysterious and mystical East. From the outset, the reader is confronted with a labyrinth: the narrative depicts this theme explicitly, since the novel presents three labyrinths in which Sanjay each time becomes lost. Ariadne is not who one thinks, the Minotaur is also Mahisha, the buffalo-demon slain by the great goddess. Ulysses is a medieval knight lost in present-day Berlin, the chakra can equally be read as a rose garden. In other words, the apparent transparency of the signs or their fluid circulation between different civilizations – a transparency which allows Shakti, for example, as well as being Durga, Kali, or Parvati, to be transformed into Athena, into

[7]This multi-voice novel engages with the autobiographical accounts of the 'Creuse deportees' (see Gosse 2005, Martial 2003). [Translator's note: this is a reference to the deportation of some 1600 Reunion Island children, of whom Gosse and Martial were two, to underpopulated areas of France, among them the department of Creuse, between 1963 and 1982, without any prospect of their return to their home island. This 'reverse deportation' was largely hidden from public view in France until accounts of it came to media attention in 2002, from which several novels emerged. Robert's title 'Creuse, ta tombe' contains a telling French play on words, in that 'creuse', as well as being the name of a French department, is also the imperative form of the verb 'creuser' meaning 'to dig'.]

[8]For a detailed analysis of this novel, see Magdelaine-Adrianjafimo 2009, Marimoutou 2013.

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a Tibetan woman penitent or into a gypsy, and that Shiva can also be a circus owner or a player of an African djembe drum – reflects back in reality to a reified representation produced by the European Orientalist discourse. But these thematic labyrinths are the paths of infinite regression of something else. Every journey carries with it the possibility or even certainty of losing its way, of failing to reach its destination, of disaster: every exploration the possibility or certainty of loss, of bewilderment, of death. The transit through time and space, from the novel's perspective, seems to draw back to the primordial space where the ultimate labyrinth would be that of the heart. But once again this is a deception. He who sets out comes back towards a tomb, and the labyrinth of the heart simply refers back to the teaching of the Mauritian guru, the pandit Sharma. The journey of initiation leads nowhere; Sanjay will not have learned anything that he did not already know. The text concludes with a reference to Kabir, the Indian mystic poet and philosopher, as well as to the great discourse of the world as an interpretive illusion and as a representation that is always culturally situated and partial, where each individual has access to the culture of the other only through his own and – in the vertigo of infinite recession – has access to his own culture only through the mediation of the culture of the other: 'For a mountain in the distance is a cloud become rock, and a cloud in the distance is a mountain become vapour' (Sewtohul 2009: 255).

This theme of frontiers constituting a labyrinth deprived of any real Ariadne's thread is even more sharply drawn in the writer's last novel, *Made in Mauritius* (Sewtohul 2012). The novel relates a constant migration, a continual crossing of borders, from Maoist China to Hong Kong, from Hong Kong to Mauritius, from Mauritius to various parts of Australia, only to become enclosed within a shanty town built near some Aboriginal sites, set up and controlled by one of the characters and named by him Port-Louis, like the capital of Mauritius. But wandering in the labyrinth also characterizes the paths of the characters within the different spaces traversed or lived in – China, Hong Kong, Mauritius, or Australia. Whoever the characters are, they become lost in the spaces where they find themselves. In Sewtohul's universe, the world, even at its most known and experienced, is a labyrinth, and every journey constitutes a danger of loss of direction signs (Sewtohul 2012: 65). This presence of the labyrinth is so constant that the characters, as children, end up transforming the city of Port Louis into a maze, as if in order to become familiar with this obscure order of the world. Every crossroads is made a frontier, where lurks the danger of becoming lost. The terror which the labyrinth conceals is due to the fact that it is always likely to be shielding ghosts arising both from the past and the stories that the place has given birth to, shadows which are susceptible to transform the individuals themselves into shadows (*ibid.* 54).

Thus, the world as perceived no longer relates to a particular reality but to an imaginary representation whose effect is to transform everything into a potential danger. Thus, one of the characters, Laval, and his woman companion Frances get lost in the mountains in Australia. They hope to find their way out by following some Aborigines who are returning from a nocturnal ceremony. But these latter potential saviours, who can indeed help the characters emerge from the labyrinth in which they have become lost, are perceived as being extremely troubling precisely because of their supposed complicity with the environment (*ibid.* 264). But the Aborigines can find their way only because they are guided by someone who looks Aboriginal but who turns out

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to be Feisal, the childhood friend of Laval who had emigrated to Australia at the same time as the latter, but who had been lost track of for a long time and was the object of Frances and Laval's search, but whom Laval did not manage to recognize. The spatial labyrinth, in Laval's way of seeing, could only make him an Aborigine. This play of infinitely reversible and uninterpretable signs culminates here in the fact that in reality, the labyrinth winds through the middle of cane fields which reproduce the cane fields of Mauritius, thus installing Mauritius on Australian soil, and that the Ariadne's thread which allows this stifling and disturbing labyrinth to be escaped from turns out to be a beacon installed on the cargo container which has long served Laval as a place to live in and which now has been set on the top of the hill which overlooks the Australian Port Louis.

The known landscape, when it is recognized but seen as 'out of place' is an object of terror because of its worrying familiarity which transforms it for that very reason into a labyrinth (*ibid*.: 265). There is a strange reversibility of signs and things, since it is the Mauritian Feisal who becomes the guide for the Aborigines on their own land, through the fields of sugar-cane which reconstruct the Mauritian landscape on Australian soil[9], and that, furthermore, the margins and the centers came to exchange their values and their meanings[10].

But the novel's most revealing figure of this linkage between boundary crossings, frontiers, labyrinths, and phantoms is no doubt the cargo container which pervades the text from one end to the other, from Hong Kong to Port-Louis (in Australia). By definition, a container is the perfect metonymy of interoceanic and intercontinental transport. In this novel, the container will undergo a certain number of metamorphoses in order to be adapted (or to adapt) to the most varied situations, but what will remain constant will be its initial function which will produce effects on the other characters[11]. A steel box for transporting goods in one way or another, and remaining essentially this despite its various avatars, the container will always leave its mark on those who go inside it or who live in it by conferring upon them also in more or less clearly defined fashion, and more or less spectral fashion, the status of cargo or migrant. And out of this, its changes of function bathe everything that happens in the novel in an ironic atmosphere shifted from the usual, which accentuates the non-consonance of the subjects with their acts, of the living with their environments. Its traverse through the narrative and its spaces is significant: from the means of transport of Chinese goods to becoming the dwelling of Laval and his parents in the

[9]This inversion is also found in the fact that it is by slowing down their walking that Frances and Laval can maintain contact with the Aborigines and Feisal, whereas when they accelerated they found themselves being left behind: 'It was completely illogical, but they nevertheless had really no choice as they were exhausted after their long fruitless walking of the previous day, their bad night sleeping in the bush,or and their sudden awakening. They tried to keep the same gap between them and the Aborigines while slowing down their steps, and strangely that worked' (Sewtohul 2012: 267).

[10]'But really these Aborigines seemed to be living in a quite different country, a vast empty expanse, of fields and scrub and solitary trees, like that one on that hill over there, which seemed to be observing their slow approach. It's quite bizarre, thought Laval, we always think of the Aborigines as people of the margins, but look at the extent of the margin that they live in. Maybe it is we who are the marginal dwellers, holed up in our little cities on the coast, while they wander about in what we call empty land' (Sewtohul 2012: 271).

[11]'The *other* characters' because the container is in itself wholly a character of the novel.

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quarter of Port-Louis in Mauritius – which will make Laval's parents permanent illegal immigrants everywhere; from this precarious living space to a podium for the official Mauritian independence celebrations; from a podium to a bastion for urban guerrilla warfare during the Mauritian student revolts, from an urban guerrilla base to a platform for an artistic installation (after it had been submerged in a river then retrieved), for an art-installation platform to a secret refuge for a clandestine immigrant, then to a bar on the campus of an Australian university, then from a bar to the base for the beacon which will guide the Aborigines, from a beacon to a mortuary space when Laval dies in it, and then finally to a funerary dais on which his body will be cremated. The adventure of Laval through all the spaces which he will traverse begins from the moment that the man who is not yet his father flees from Mao's China at the time of the Great Leap Forward. Ironically, the itinerary of the container consists precisely in accomplishing – in farcical manner and in cocking a snook at utopias of political emancipation – this 'great leap forward' which takes him from Hong Kong to the back-blocks of Australia. And the only 'great helmsman' of the tale is none other than its more or less final metamorphosis which is there to guide humans towards the exit from the labyrinths. The container shows itself to be a concentration and an accumulation of space-time which retains in itself traces of all the space-times it has passed through or experienced, modifying in doing so both the real and the imaginary landscapes, both exterior and interior, symbolic or otherwise, and inscribing in them the traces of those which were met before. In a certain way the container is a coffer for bearing secret messages (see Abraham & Torok 1978), transporting secret-message bearing creatures and bringing a disabused, farce-like, and ironical reading to the emancipatory illusions of human beings and nations, from the Great Leap Forward to the way of life of the Aborigines, passing by way of the act of foundation of the Mauritian nation, the dreams and discussions of leaders of 'revolutionary' political organizations and student revolts. Furthermore, the adaptation of the container to a platform for Mauritian independence serves as a passport for Laval to be admitted to a fine-arts university in Australia. This international transport cargo-holder with no assignable origin transforms into an element of the artistic installation which opens to him the doors of the university. But the work was elaborated through the change of status and function of the goods brought from Hong Kong by his parents, who dreamed of getting wealthy in a foreign land through commerce. And it is precisely this heterogeneous mass of cheap merchandise which the budding artist entitled 'Made in Mauritius'. Not only does the container reveal to what extent the artistic work is intimately tied up with the unsold items of goods which he fetishizes into a work of art, but it shows how this work of artistic transformation depends upon the misunderstanding and illusion which characterize the perceptions of otherness and authorize the crossing of boundaries, as well as the installation which both becomes artistic and in a different place. The text satirizes the naïve illusion of 'white' postcolonial societies – in this case Australia and its universities – concerning what is the contemporary art of 'natives' and of once colonized peoples.

Sewtohul's novel nevertheless carries certain instructive components. In the same sense that one never truly knows the place of origin, which is never anything but a place within a labyrinthine passage traversed by moving boundaries which are difficult to decipher, one also never understands the place of arrival. But the most dysphoric message consists in showing that no one ever truly knows anyone and the oldest

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and most intimate relationship will be based on a misunderstanding. At the end of the novel, after the cremation of Laval's body, Feisal, the friend of his childhood and adolescence, he with whom – and for whom – Laval had crossed the Indian Ocean from west to east, he who had just been relocated after so many years of separation and after a labyrinthine and exhausting search, declares to Frances:

> 'Yeah, he and I went a long way together.' He sighed and added: 'It's funny all the same, I never really knew him' (Sewtohul 2012: 306).

But it would have been necessary to cross many boundaries and pass through multiple labyrinths to come to that awareness.

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