

Françoise Lionnet, "Le su et l'incertain. Cosmopolitiques créoles de l'Océan Indien/The Known and the Uncertain. Creole Cosmopolitics of the Indian Ocean," L'Atelier de l'écriture, La Pelouse, Trou d'Eau Douce, Île Maurice, 2012, 320 p., ISBN 99903-36-69-5

Intended for readers competent in English, French, and Creole, as Françoise Lionnet, Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, emphasises in her introduction, "Le su et l'incertain/The Known and the Uncertain" takes us on an imaginative voyage across the Indian Ocean. This linguistic choice, which might seem controversial since it limits substantially the number of readers, results from the author's desire to celebrate the multilingual heritage of the island of Mauritius, which, although a British Crown Colony from 1810 to 1968, remains oddly invisible in Anglophone postcolonial discourse. The linguistic plurality of Lionnet's book is also, on a larger scale, a response to the marginalization of Francophone and *Creolophone* history in postcolonial studies, and an attempt to initiate creative encounters between postcolonialism and Francophonie. Her insightful, interdisciplinary interpretations of various transoceanic literary, cultural, and political phenomena are situated between *le su* and *l'incertain*, "the known" of archival documentation and "the uncertain" of poetic imagination. Analysing the neglect of the Indian Ocean in studies of postcolonialism, Lionnet proposes to see it as the first space of cosmopolitics and creolization. At the centre of her reflection is the Mascarene Archipelago (Mauritius, Reunion, and Rodrigues) and the island of Mauritius in particular, seen as a tropical paradise, a *nation arc-en-ciel*, a utopian ideal of harmonious co-existence of French, English, Indian, South African, and other cultures.

The study is divided into three parts which form a kaleidoscopic structure, being in dialogue with one another. The first part foregrounds history, cosmopolitanism, and creolization. Lionnet rereads here *Paul et Virginie* (1788) by

Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, which has gained the status of myth in Mauritian culture. She focuses in particular on Amitav Ghosh's postcolonial novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), showing how this Bengali Indian writer (ab)uses Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's classic, playing with its romantic themes. In Lionnet's view, the figure of the ship in Ghosh's novel, transporting its passengers to the sugar estates of Mauritius, becomes a microcosm of the colonial world, its alliances and conflicts and its Creole dynamics. Importantly, it fills the lacunas of history by recovering in an imaginative way the obliterated stories of Black slaves and Indian indentured workers. Furthermore, in this part Lionnet attempts to reconceptualize cosmopolitanism, traditionally understood in terms of refinement, freedom and tolerance, and creolization, associated with the cliché of insularity of groups without history; questioning the binary opposition between the two notions, she proposes to bring them into dialogue with each other, and thus to see "creolization as the cosmopolitanism of the subaltern, and cosmopolitanism as the creolization of the elites" (65). As she demonstrates in her analysis of various forms of belonging in Mauritian political discourse, the 2006 book *Mauriciens* by photographer Yven Pitchen and Barlen Pyamootoo's 2008 biographical *Salogi's*, Mauritian culture "is a crucible of cosmopolitanism and creolization" (90). The country has benefited from British, French, and Indian ideologies, and has become an exceptional example of "quiet, planned, and successful diversity" (95). However, this exotic, utopian appeal of the island is undermined by Lionnet herself who points out that the sense of multiple belonging, characterizing the creoleness of Mauritian society today, coexists with various forms of communalism that might easily erupt into ethnic violence.

The second part, "La littérature et le savoir/Literature and Knowledge," offers fascinating analyses of the rewritings of Shakespeare's plays in the Mascarene region and of Baudelaire's poetry and its critical misinterpretations. Lionnet shows how Creole writer Dev Virahsawmy translates Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into Creole — language and context — in his play *Toufann* (1991), underscoring Shakespeare's transcolonial cultural appeal and thus echoing African writers' concerns, but also negotiating the overlapping colonial histories of Mauritius. In her opinion, by disarranging and rearranging Shakespearian scenarios, mixing European and non-European realities, *Toufann* highlights "the openness of Creole cultures to an infinite and unpredictable array of possible transpositions and permutations" (141). Lionnet thus demonstrates that Creole literatures, rarely seen as logical cultural developments independent of the European canon, destabilise simplistic academic dichotomies and require new critical approaches in tune with their linguistic variety and epistemologically innovative interventions. In her intriguing and thought-provoking re-reading of Charles Baudelaire's formative voyage to the East Indies, his iconic poems "À une dame Créole" and "Le cygne" in particular, the author

contests the interpretations of Christopher Miller and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, claiming that they have neglected historical and geographical specificities, confusing, for example, l'Île de France of the Ancien Régime (today's Mauritius) with Bourbon (today's Reunion Island). Discovering in Baudelaire's poetry hitherto unexplored sympathies for the French abolitionist movement and for the victims of colonial violence, Lionnet re-visions the French poet as a "creolized and creolizing writer" and reclaims him "for a redefined French and Francophone literature that includes the colonial literary and travel influences on his poetry as well as his own legacy within European modernist traditions" (197).

The last part of *Le su et l'incertain/The Known and the Uncertain* consists of comparative studies of the islands of Mauritius and Reunion, and various discourses of discontent in this region of the Indian Ocean in relation to the discourses of (in)equality in Europe and North America. The author demonstrates fundamental differences between Mauritius (an independent republic) and Reunion (a French *département d'Outre-mer*), shaped by different histories of colonialism (British indirect rule in the former, French centralism in the latter) and discourses of belonging (shifting cultural allegiances in Mauritius and a single hegemonic discourse of identity in Reunion). She subsequently describes the race-blind republicanism that has shaped French cultural and political thought since the Revolution. Only the events in the *banlieues* of Paris in November 2005, in contrast to the riots in Reunion in 1991, which remained invisible, caused the French to become more aware of the *question noire* and, in more general terms, of the crisis of the traditional French model of democratic belonging. She suggests that, as opposed to the French and American models of political exceptionalism, which in fact encourage hierarchical dynamics, an *archipelagic* concept of the nation allows changes and exchanges, and more fluid and creolized forms of cultural identity, which, in her opinion, might become a source of transformative potential for twenty-first-century civic culture. Creole subjectivity, complex and *improvisational*, is epitomised by Creole *speech* "as an index of both flexibility and resistance to dominant epistemologies" (263). The last chapter in the book is devoted to Reunion's dependence on France and the mismanagement of the *chikungunya* epidemic in 2006, which highlighted the asymmetries between the *domiens* (the inhabitants of the DOM, the overseas department) and the *métropolitains* (the inhabitants of continental France). Lionnet links this crisis with the transfer of 1,641 Reunionese minors to France in 1966 to be adopted by farming families in depopulated regions of France. She closes the last part with intriguing reflections on the relation between kinship and the state.

A fascinating voyage from island to island, *Le su et l'incertain/The Known and the Unknown* reveals, particularly to Anglophone readers, uncharted areas of the postcolonial imagination. Based on rigorous historical and sociological

research, the book renders visible several important Francophone Mauritian writers as well as new areas of cultural and political inquiry. It contributes both to postcolonial and to Oceanic studies, reconfiguring the island as an important space of cosmopolitan interaction *and* creolization, resulting from translocal encounters in the Indian Ocean.

Anna Branach-Kallas
Nicolaus Copernicus University