

NARRATING THE INDIAN OCEAN: CHALLENGING THE CIRCUITS OF MIGRATING NOTIONS

NARRAR O OCEANO ÍNDICO: NOTAS SOBRE OS CIRCUITOS DE CONCEITOS ITINERANTES

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This paper presents an outline of the parallels between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean seen from a cultural studies' perspective. The discussion will highlight some concepts, such as *Créolie*, *Coolitude* and *Créolité* which were created to grasp the specificity of the cultural consequences of forced migration and the imposed contact among a multitude of cultures in the two regions. Secondly, insularity will be presented as an in-between space of contact between cultures where knowledge is generated, negotiated and transmitted via its narration. This process will be analysed as an example of *Créolité* in the context of the Indian Ocean, taking as case study the three volumes of *Enlacement(s)* (2013) by the Malagasy writer Jean-Luc Raharimanana.

Keywords: *Créolité*; Poetics of Relation; Indian Ocean Studies; Malagasy literature.

Este artigo apresenta um esboço de paralelos entre o Atlântico e o Oceano Índico partindo da perspectiva dos estudos culturais. A discussão irá destacar alguns conceitos como *Créolie*, *Coolitude* e *Créolité* que foram concebidos para explicitar a especificidade das consequências culturais de emigrações forçadas, as quais obrigaram ao contacto entre uma grande diversidade de culturas nestas duas regiões. Em segundo lugar, aborda-se a insularidade como uma zona de contacto entre culturas, onde conhecimento é gerado, negociado e transmitido através de narrativas. Este processo será analisado como um exemplo de *Créolité* no contexto do Índico, focando os três volumes de *Enlacement(s)* (2013), do escritor madagascarense Jean-Luc Raharimanana.

Palavras-chave: *Créolité*, Poética da relação, Estudos do Oceano Índico, Literatura de Madagáscar

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I. Migrating notions: how to capture the specificity of contact zones...

As Isabel Hofmeyr has shown in her article “The Black Atlantic meets the Indian Ocean” (2011), many parallels are drawn between these two maritime contact zones, the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. In both regions, focus has been laid on the signification of the islands as contact zones, suggesting directions to rethink national identities usually linked to territories and national entities, along an axis of linear history, etc.. However, the Atlantic has been much more present in research and only rather recently parallels between these two contact zones have been pointed out.

Considering the Indian Ocean, Françoise Lionnet underlines its intrinsic characteristic as contact zone:

Zone de contacts multiculturels depuis plus de 5000 ans, l’océan Indien est un carrefour où se sont croisés tous les peuples des « vieux » continents. Explorateurs et voyageurs en quête de fortune ou de connaissances nouvelles, pêcheurs, marins et marchands y ont établi des relations commerciales, religieuses ou savantes bien avant que des échanges de la même envergure ne s’instaurent entre les habitants des pourtours de l’Atlantique ou du Pacifique. [...] Ce trafic intense, à une échelle déjà « globale », a engendré les premiers cosmopolitismes et les créolisations qui ont suivi. (Lionnet, 2012: 7)

Later on, she has taken up some arguments of Hofmeyr drawing the attention to the fact that the meaning of creolization has not been sufficiently explored in the Indian Ocean:

Hofmeyr mentions the dialectics of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, imperialism and mobility, old diasporic networks and new public spheres. She acknowledges in a footnote existing research on Indian Ocean creolization and insular cultures. But her argument does not gesture toward the work that the notion of creolization can do to open up the above binaries and the forms of entanglement they hide. (Lionnet, 2012: 61)

Early research on the specificity of the situation in the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean as regions where migrations have brought about continued encounters among a multitude of cultures – often in a context of violence or forced labour – focused on the observation of the ways these communities generated a multitude of strata, sometimes merging different cultural, social, linguistic and ethnic elements. Interestingly, these approaches started

with reflections on language, the core means of communication in such communities. In Guadeloupe, Dany Bébel-Gisler published her book *La langue créole force jugulée* (1976), and almost at the same time Axel Gauvin published his *Du créole opprimé au créole libéré* (1977) in La Réunion. Both authors consider the development of the Creole language as a manifestation of the contact of various cultures that have to find a common ground for communication in a violent context. The evolution of free expression and diversification of the usage of Creole is seen as a sign of the evolution of a new culture, emerging from this contact zone. The subtitle of Gauvin's book is significant as he names the Creole of La Réunion "la langue réunionnaise" giving this Creole the status of a language, instead of considering it a dialect or a pidgin.

The difficult quest for an identity of one's own, something new and different from all its cultural heritages, is reflected on the discussion around the notions of *Créolie* and *Créolité* in the Indian Ocean. Already in 1970, Jean Albany spoke of "créolie", a term one finds again in Gilbert Aubry, in his *Hymne à la créolie*, from 1978. When Jean-François Sam-Long, from La Réunion, retraces the development of these notions in *De l'élégie à la créolie* (1989), he points out that there are two major tendencies: a traditionalist movement that places itself close to France, in which "créolie" would be considered as folkloric; and a leftist movement that also sees "créolie" as a Francophile movement, so they would rather favour the term "créolité", that would highlight African and Asian heritage in the construction of a multilayered identity. Parallel to this evolution in the Indian Ocean, in the Caribbean, the *Charte Culturelle Créole* is first published in 1982, claiming rights and duties in this new Creole society.

Nous pensons que la Créolité est le fondement et le prolongement d'une négritude authentiquement humaniste. Mais elle intègre aussi les valeurs de l'indianité qui ont trop longtemps été méprisées, voire ignorées par les promoteurs de la contestation culturelle aux Antilles et en Guyane. Quant à l'héritage culturel européen, son insertion dans la Créolité est légitime, mais il importe de travailler à le restituer à une place plus pertinente. Il n'est pas *toute* notre identité, mais une composante de cette dernière. (GEREC, 1982: 20-21)

It is very interesting to see that as early as 1982 there was already awareness that merging various cultural heritages would create a new Creole culture and society. The next passage is even more important:

La Créolité renvoie dos-à-dos tous les 'arrières-mondes' pour construire l'avenir sur des bases transraciales et transculturelles où l'individu se situe par rapport à la communauté. La Créolité apparaît alors comme synonyme générique de guadeloupéanité, guyanité, haïtianité, martinicanité, etc. Pas seulement un faisceau de cultures, la Créolité est l'expression concrète d'une civilisation en gestation. (GEREC, 1982: 30)

One can conclude that though the authors of the *Charte Culturelle Créole* take into account the existence of local specificities, they put forward the idea of a "transracial" and "transcultural" basis for all the mentioned societies. In this sense, "Créolité" means that a new civilisation is in "the process of becoming". It is remarkable that all the important aspects at the core of the debate on "Créolité" today are already mentioned in the quotes above. On the one hand, they assert the worth of this new civilization while, on the other hand, the concept remains an open reference so that other Creole communities can be part of this vision. The use of the word "civilization" in this context is very important as it acknowledges the cultural value of *Créole Cultures* as equal to other civilizations. Simultaneously, the authors avoid defining cultures of contact zones through lack, incompleteness or difference in relation to origins or original civilizations.

The breakthrough for the currency of such a term as *Créolité* only came with the publication of *Eloge de la Créolité* by Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé, in 1989, which caught the attention of intellectual circles. *Créolité* became a new philosophy, setting the horizon for the discussion of societies that emerge from contact zones. The most relevant quotation for my argument is the following:

Nous, Antillais créoles, sommes donc porteurs d'une double solidarité :

- d'une solidarité antillaise (géopolitique) avec tous les peuples de notre Archipel, quelles que soient nos différences culturelles : notre Antillanité ;
- d'une solidarité créole avec tous les peuples africains, mascarins, asiatiques et polynésiens qui relèvent des mêmes affinités anthropologiques que nous : notre Créolité. (Chamoiseau *et al.*, 1989 : 33)

These authors define "Créolité" as a set of anthropological affinities in various regions in the world. By contrast, the notion of "Créolité" by GEREC underlined the idea that a consolidating civilization could be observed in various regions in the world, living a similar situation of contact zone. In

the latter case, the focus was rather laid on the outcome of a process than on the process itself. But in both cases efforts have been made to overcome a regional or an anthropological relatedness in order to enclose comparable, parallel phenomena around the world.

During the 1990s, Édouard Glissant published *Poétiques III-V* and, most important, his *Poétique de la relation*, the text where he develops his concept of “Créolisation” and of “Tout-Monde”. These texts had a considerable impact on later critical reflections concerning processes of “Créolisation”, described by Glissant as ongoing evolving dynamics, directing the development of Creole cultures towards a “Tout-Monde”. It is important to note that Glissant develops his ideas referring to Creole cultures, but he would expand his reflections to all cultures, even those that would be – usually – considered as ‘homogeneous’. Therefore, Glissant argues that all communities undergo processes of Creolization via diverse contacts at different moments in time and across space.

In 1992, Khal Torabully, from Mauritius, coined the concept of “Coolitude”, his alternative to the idea of “Créolisation” as proposed by Glissant. Torabully’s concept is directly linked to *Négritude* in the sense that it stands as a quest for the recognition of the common experience of the “Middle Passage”, a sort of violent tabula rasa, as the basis for a new community. It rather sounds like an echo to the *Charte de la Créolité* of 1982: “Nous pensons que la Créolité est le fondement et le prolongement d’une négritude authentiquement humaniste” (GEREC, 1982). “Coolitude” would then be a prolongation of the humanist *Négritude*. However, to suggest this new concept for the context of the Indian Ocean seems to aim at strengthening Indian heritage, even though Torabully denies that this is his motivation. Still, one might find a parallel in the short upraising of “Indianité” in Guadeloupe, as a reaction to the strong *Créolité* Movement, that claims to be the voice of all ethnic and cultural groups of Creole societies, though, in fact, *Créolité* displays a strong focus on the African heritage, partly neglecting other heritages. With “Coolitude”, Torabully wants to offer a concept that goes beyond the experience of Coolies. As Marina Carter explains:

Khal Torabully never lapses into an essentialist philosophy. Indeed, he does away with exile, and clearly reveals in *Cale d’Étoiles* that the key-text is the ‘Book of Voyage’, giving the sea voyage an essential function in his poetry. It is to be understood as a place of destruction and creation of identity, which is a preliminary to the *enracinement* in the host country, itself comprehended as a dynamic space of the diversity of perceptions and cultures. (Carter, 1992: 15)

This focus directs you towards approaches that privilege questioning the notion of insularity, as a way of being in the world in-between sea and land, and therefore, in-between different cultures and memories. At the same time, it is surprising to see that Torabully doesn't reflect the writings of Glissant who also underlines the importance of "la Traversée" [the Passage], the plantation and forced labour, before he turns to considerations on the *Créolisation* process of all societies, which would lead towards the "Tout-Monde". Maybe this neglect is due to the fact that *Créolisation* is a concept linked to the history of slavery and violence, something Torabully might try to avoid engaging with. Lionnet makes this a strong point in her reflections:

By definition, creolization, like cosmopolitanism, presupposes patterns of movement and degrees of mixing. I stated in the introduction of this book that we might begin to think of creolization as the cosmopolitanism of the subaltern, and cosmopolitanism as the creolization of the elites. (Lionnet, 2012: 65)

Discourses on creolization still often follow these lines, but as I have pointed out earlier, Glissant took the historical experience of the violent encounter in the Caribbean as a starting point for his reflections on ongoing processes of creolization: *Créolité* would therefore rather grasp the specificity of this regional experience, while *Créolisation* is the notion that describes the worldwide process of being related, the poetics of the relation, "poétiques de la relation". But, as Lionnet points out, notions of "cosmopolitanism" or sometimes "universalism" are preferred when referring to the Northern or Western hemisphere.

II. Creolization vs. Cosmopolitanism?

If we link the two notions, *Creolization* and *Cosmopolitanism*, willingly overcoming the gap caused by social and historical binaries, the idea of 'relation' gains new relevance. Lionnet shows that Mauritians do have a "feeling of belonging somewhere else" (Lionnet, 2012: 99) as well as to the island, something that is reflected in a Creole saying:

Or, as the *Kreol Morisien* saying puts it, in Mauritius, *Tu dimunn pu vini kreol* (everyone is going to become Creole) [...], which is another way of stressing that there has always been an existential cosmopolitanism at work in the culture since its beginnings, one that corresponds to Pheng Cheah's reading of

Kantian cosmopolitanism as a crucial turning point in eighteenth-century history. (Lionnet, 2012: 99)

The two main arguments presented in the quote are of particular interest to us. She refers to language, and we have seen above that this was the starting point for the reflections on *Creolization*, as the coming into being of a new language, a new medium of communication for the people coming from various backgrounds. With the saying, she also draws on oral traditions as part of a popular culture that would transmit knowledge on how to react to a challenging environment in order to survive. The second point is the reference to Kant's ideas on "eternal peace" ("Zum ewigen Frieden", 1795) as Kant spoke of a "Weltrepublik", where all states of the world would respect the same rules, and the respect for the rights of other peoples would preserve peace. One could, as Cheah does, draw a parallel between the idea of a controlled public sphere that enables each country to be itself and at the same time be part of a larger community, and the idea of "relatedness", an idea that implies mutual respect in a shared space. In the quoted article, Lionnet also underlines (beyond the necessity of theorizing relationality) that "words" can make "worlds" (2013: 97), highlighting the performative power of words:

A crucible of cosmopolitanism *and* creolization, Mauritian literature and visual culture is a vibrant example of world literature understood both as a reflection of existing global dynamics and as a world-making activity that brings new forms of relation and new epistemologies into being. Poets and novelists, dramatists, photographers, musicians and film-makers open new perspectives on twenty-first century identities and reflect the diverse and interpenetrating (cultural / linguistic / religious) legacies of the country's past and present, its public as well as private spheres, and their overlapping arenas. (Lionnet, 2012: 90)

This idea of the performativity of words, the power of bringing something into being by literature is crucial when we think about the narration of creolization processes that turn into being the process of the making of a relational world, a "tout-monde". In an article on "La question de l'universel ou *Traveling Tales*. L'exemple de Maryse Condé" (Fendler, 2013), I have drawn on the French philosopher Alain Badiou and his American colleague, Kwame Appiah, to grasp the intertwined strands of conceptualizing the "universal" and words as medium of communication between the individual and the surrounding world as well as between individuals. Badiou speaks of a "processus transversal à la totalité des savoirs disponibles" (Badiou, 2008: 1). In his terms, the universal is "pensée":

Que l'élément propre de l'universel soit la pensée signifie que rien n'est universel dans la forme de l'objet ou de la légalité objective. L'universel est essentiellement inobjectif. Il n'est expérimentable que dans la production, ou la reproduction, d'un trajet de pensée, et ce trajet constitue, ou reconstitue une disposition subjective. (Badiou, 2008: 1)

Thoughts are potential acts that can turn into being. Appiah would emphasize the dialogical dimension of this enactment of words:

(But) what makes the conversation possible is not always shared 'culture'; not even, as the older humanists imagined, universal principles or values [...]; nor yet shared understanding [...]. What works in encounters with other human beings across gaps of space, time, and experience is enormously various. [...] For we do learn something about humanity in responding to the worlds people conjure with words in the narrative framework of the folktale, or with images in the frame of film: we learn about the extraordinary diversity of human responses to our world and the myriad points of intersection of those various responses. (Appiah, 2007: 258)

Appiah underlines that folktales, and we could add, narration in general, capture the experience of being in the world, becoming "travelling tales" as he puts it further on. Narrating the Indian Ocean could therefore be considered part of a larger corpus of narrations. The texts coming from such a contact zone will reflect in a privileged way the experience of *relationality* of the world, as Glissant did argue in *Poétique de la relation*, enabling you to think the world as a "tout-monde".

III. How to narrate the Indian ocean? The example of *Enlacement(s)*

If we consider the aspects discussed above as being fundamental elements of Indian Ocean narrations, the example of the latest publication of the Malagasy writer Jean-Luc Raharimanana is particularly interesting. Raharimanana, who has been living and working in exile in France, has published a considerable number of novels, short stories, and theatre plays. He regularly returns to the question of memory and commemoration in Mada-

gascar, especially to the episode of 1947.⁽¹⁾ In order to create a universe via narration, he not only addresses the same subjects repeatedly but he also makes certain figures re-appear in various contexts. He also combines texts with pictures, music and choreography. He voluntarily blurs frontiers between genres, text units, time and space, thus creating a universe that sometimes seems a continuation of – the conventionally accepted as – real, sometimes as an alternative to reality or even more vivid than what we commonly experience as reality.

...relationality and space...

His last publication is exceptional in its form: three small volumes of the size A6 are placed in a vertical order in a box with the title *Enlacement(s)* presented as a “tryptichon”. The form refers to a piece of art, painting or sculpture that will ‘visualize’ a story by combining three pictures. Physically, the three parts form one piece, and only when one takes a volume out of the box to read it, is the given order destroyed in a certain way, opening a new perspective to link the whole to the parts in a new way. *Enlacement(s)*, the title, enforces this meaning. The idea of being related, intertwined in one direction or in several ones, is already indicated by the plural ‘s’ in brackets. The first part, entitled “des ruines”, is followed by “obscena” and by “il n’y a plus de pays”. By “ruins”, the narrator means the country, memory and the past:

Ne suis que vestiges, ce qui tient encore debout d’un pays qui ne fut pas, d’un pays qui n’est pas, d’un pays qui ne sera peut-être pas. Et je garde le doute – peut-être, car c’est là mon pays, le possible, l’imaginable, mais qui n’est pas encore... Je ne sais pas s’il le sera un jour. Si de mon vivant... A-t-il jamais existé ? Ruines avant d’être bâti, bâti sur rêves, l’utopie aux murs de tempête, mes colonnes s’érigent dans l’œil du cyclone. (Raharimanana, 2013: 6)

The narrator is questioning the subsistence of memory, of the being in the world of this country, that might exist, but which is rather a “possibility”, like a projection into the future. It is significant how the text swings between past, present and future, as well as between the real and the imagined. In addition to this open combination of elements, the text refers to elements meant to be characteristic of a tropical region like “walls of storm” and the “eye of the tycoon”. These natural references are used as constitutive ele-

⁽¹⁾ Year of the Malagasy Uprising, a rebellion against the colonial rule of France, which was violently crushed by the French government.

ments to invoke a certain region, but, at the same time, they represent a rather floating, unstable image that changes according to perspective. This poetic questioning of the position of narration could also correspond to the idea of *the relational*, as the image of the place depends on the perspective, on the relation that can be established with the observer and, furthermore, on the relation between the various elements composing it.

...language...

Right from the beginning, the narrator reflects on his language, and even if he doesn't speak of the Creole language as a vehicle to convey the experience of having been colonized, traumatized, language is part of his reflection on the position you speak from:

Prendre espace quand tout est ruine autour de soi. Je me retourne sur ma mémoire. Ma mémoire est du plus loin que je la ressens de douleur et d'espérance. A chaque fois renouvelée, à chaque fois la même, de douleur et d'espérance. [...]

Sur le temps, je me retourne. C'est ainsi que je me vois, je suis fatigué d'espérer, mes mots essaimés le long mon espérance, mes combats, je retiens mon souffle de peur de les rendre soupirs, je chuchote, je murmure, et l'on me félicite de l'originalité de ma langue, "novatrice", "flamboyante", "lyrique", "violente"... je parlais d'une douleur, de ceux qui y sont encore, dans la douleur, je parlais d'une révolte, j'amasse les honneurs pour m'être si bien exprimé. (Raharimanana, 2013: 4)

This passage in the beginning of the first volume combines the multilayered meaning of language and speaking (in the sense of 'prise de parole'): words that express hope and despair, Raharimanana's language is never just one, it is a language that oscillates between various poles. At the same time, he deals with the position of the utterance as well as with the reception. The language he uses is a product of the experience of suffering, as well as a way of speaking about it. Nevertheless, the reception turns the expressed experience of being in between suffering and desperate trials into a matter of putting experience into words, into an appreciation of an innovative usage of language that is to be lyrical but violent. The efforts of expression are tamed by the critical appreciation and the appropriation of language without recognizing, or knowing, the lived experience behind it. This text doesn't speak of the coming into being of a Creole language, but rather of a

search for words to express lived experience. It could be Creole, as it could be the search for the expression of the experience of the world, by the colonized, the traumatized, the violated.

...relationality and cosmopolitanism...

From this position, *relationality* and cosmopolitanism turn into sensitivity for the suffering of the other. The text repeats at several points the violent episodes of the neo-colonial history of the continent:

Je n'ai pas à énumérer toutes ces mauvaises choses. Je n'ai même pas à énumérer le nom de ces pays autres où les récits se sont fendillés en troubles échos. Congo, Guinée, Rwanda, Somalie... autant de tragédies mauvaises à la bouche. J'oublie ma peau, et l'eau de plaie qui y coule n'est que l'eau de pluie que j'espère depuis longtemps. (Raharimanana, 2013: 8)

The echo is an adequate image for the idea of *relatedness*: sound that travels rapidly via vibrations by transmitting them to each object in contact. When Lionnet draws attention to the cleavage between the different perceptions of Cosmopolitanism and Creolisation, she aims at bypassing differences to see Creolisation as a globalizing process as well. Raharimanana's text seems to reflect Lionnet's idea of cleavage as he describes the linkages between a multitude of events that are the consequence of colonial and neo-colonial practices. He also presents an alphabet where each letter corresponds to the name of a place that will recall episodes of conflict or war, like e.g. Abidjan. One can conclude, this text also problematizes different perceptions of conflicts in the world and shows how everything is connected, in the spirit of *relationality*. Raharimanana's text is, therefore, an example of how complex narrating the Indian Ocean can be, taking into consideration its various layers, from the islands in the ocean, to the region and the world.

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