

## **Review: Françoise Lionnet's Twin Volumes**

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Françoise Lionnet.

*Writing Women and Critical Dialogues: Subjectivity, Gender and Irony.*  
La Pelouse, Mauritius: L'Atelier d'écriture, 2012, 319pp.

Françoise Lionnet.

*Le su et l'incertain, cosmopolitiques créoles et l'océan indien.*  
La Pelouse, Mauritius: L'Atelier d'écriture, 2012. 319pp.

These volumes on the literature, arts, and cultural politics of the Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and Réunion, bring to the fore a geographical space that has hovered over the margins of the wide-ranging scholarship produced by Françoise Lionnet in two decades. The focus on the Indian Ocean islands is personal for Lionnet who grew up in Mauritius, studied in France, and earned a name for herself as a scholar in Comparative Literature, Francophone and Women Studies in the United States. Both books are, in sum, the record of an intellectual and deeply personal trajectory.

The first volume, *Writing Women and Critical Dialogues* comprises studies of the works of women writers and filmmakers from Réunion and Mauritius published in diverse journals between 1991 and 2012. The second volume, *Le su et l'incertain* reviews and addresses the cultural politics of both islands and their experience of multicultural encounter and interaction. I have come across some of these essays as they appeared in diverse journals over several years, but clearly see the wisdom of bringing them together in two jointly published volumes. Together, these books constitute a major contribution to the study of the cultures of the Indian Ocean. I will note however, that of the two volumes, *Le su et l'incertain* is likely to hold the greatest interest for scholars in African and postcolonial studies. For those working specifically on francophone literature, women writers or Indian Ocean literature, *Writing Women and Critical Dialogues* provides critical insight into the creative writing of a group of female authors who do not feature as prominently as they ought in anthologies of world literature.

The two volumes are multilingual with some chapters in English and some chapters in French. Both books have dual titles in English and French. Throughout this review, and in the interests of clarity, I will refer to each volume by only one of its dual-language titles. Lionnet's decision to write in two languages is deliberate and represents a move to confront the reader with the daily juxtaposition of languages that typifies communication in both islands, and especially in Mauritius. But it is also an attempt to foreground what Lionnet frequently refers to as "le malentendu Anglophone" or misunderstandings about these islands that are commonplace in English-language scholarship. Much of this misunderstanding stems not only from literal monolingualism on the part of certain scholars, but also from a reflexive inattention to the nuances and unique patterns of multicultural interaction exhibited in this part of the world. Indeed, and as Lionnet makes clear, not even Réunion and Mauritius can be considered completely identical. One island cannot be substituted for the other. Likewise, and despite a similar history of slavery, forced migration and colonialism, the cultural politics of the Indian Ocean islands also differ in significant ways from that of islands in the Caribbean. Finally, both volumes are published in Mauritius and are presumably available on the islands themselves

where they will hopefully factor into local discussion about identity and cultural politics.

Lionnet justifies her focus on these islands by advocating forcefully for the relevance of islands, insular spaces and archipelagos, “small countries” as she calls them, to our understanding of big issues confronting the world in the twenty-first century: multilingualism, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and interracial dialogue among others. She makes this argument while also acknowledging that islands “do not have the same status politically or imaginatively as larger continents” (*Le su et l'incertain* 166). The islands in question matter because they have long been contact zones in trade routes connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe. Contact zones offer repeated opportunities for evaluating varied modes of cultural interaction in a world where domination, hostility, and conquest are far more typical than cooperation and peaceful co-existence.

If there is a single word that sums up the major concerns in *Le su et l'incertain*, it would be the word Creole. This is a word and concept that has been far less prominent in postcolonial theorizing than that of the hybrid and hybridity. However, Lionnet's intention is not to elevate the Creole and Créolité as the forgotten and overlooked correlate to hybridity. What interests her here are the differential values attributed to the Creole and the Cosmopolitan. These differential values are for Lionnet, the result of a misreading. In Lionnet's words, the Creole is the global South's response to the Cosmopolitan of the global North. Creolization is in her words “a subaltern cosmopolitanism” while cosmopolitanism is nothing more than “creolization for elites” (*Le su et l'incertain* 1, 5). They are, in short, related rather than incommensurable terms. And yet, the concept of the Creole enjoys far less prestige and uptake than that of the Cosmopolitan even among scholars of postcolonial literature. Consequently, the significance of creolization for our understanding of cosmopolitanism as well as the parallels and divergences between cosmopolitanism and creolization have remained under-theorized. In this work, Lionnet undertakes to provide the terms Créole, Créolité, and creolization with the kind of substantive study that Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins among others have provided for the concept of cosmopolitanism. But unlike Anthony Appiah who

turns to cosmopolitanism as a pathway to a more tolerant form of cultural exchange, Lionnet looks to creolization. In postcolonial societies and among subalterns in the world, she claims, it is creolization rather than cosmopolitanism that offers the subaltern and postcolonial subject a way to live with multicultural contact.

In Lionnet's opinion, and of the two islands, Réunion and Mauritius, examined in detail in both works, Mauritius clearly offers the more productive experience of creolization. Where Réunion has followed the French republican ideal of imposed cultural uniformity, Mauritius has allowed multiple cultures and languages to flourish side by side. English is the official language, but French is widely spoken in schools. Almost everyone speaks Creole (*KreolMorisien*) which thrives side by side with communities speaking Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, and Cantonese among other languages. Several of these languages are also optional languages offered in local schools. Though Mauritius has had its own experiences of violent uprisings, relatively peaceful coexistence among speakers of different languages with different faiths is not accidental, says Lionnet, but the result of policies that enable individual citizens to carefully manage multiple attachments and allegiances, instead of being coerced into embracing one identity while ditching all others.

Lionnet looks to representation, in the novel, in drama, in photography and in film to understand what has been misunderstood about the Indian Ocean communities, and how the misunderstandings have proliferated even among well-intended scholars of postcolonial arts. While postcolonial critics have done much to deconstruct the exoticizing images of the Indian Ocean found in canonical works of French literature by such authors as Bernardin de Saint Pierre and Charles Baudelaire, even they have not always been attentive to local details found in works by these authors. In this respect, Lionnet takes both Christopher Miller and Gayatri Spivak to task.

The writings of the Mauritian playwright, Dev Virahsawmy, and especially his rendering of Shakespeare's *Tempest* in the Mauritian Creole language with his play *Toufann*, as well as the Franco-Mauritian, Yves Pitchen's photography offer alternatives to the canonical Western and touristic representations of the Indian Ocean islands as unproblematic tropical paradise. The Indo-Mauritian

playwright, Virahsawmy, who speaks, neither the Hindi nor Tamil of his forbears, looks to Shakespeare, but also Bollywood in his Creole-language play. His chosen sources of inspiration embody what Lionnet describes as transcolonial forms of solidarity, and the multiple points of reference that typify contemporary Mauritian identity.

A scholar of African literature and African studies might very well ask: of what relevance are the questions examined by Françoise Lionnet in these volumes to those who work in African literary studies? As I myself have pointed out in some essays, a certain distancing from Africa remains entrenched in popular self-identification in the Indian Ocean islands. And yet, confrontations over ethnicity, citizenship, and religion have become ever more intense and fierce across the African continent in the early twenty-first century. It is for such reasons as these that the small spaces of the Indian Ocean remain relevant to us all, in African literary studies and beyond.

For example, the literary works examined in *Writing Women and Critical Dialogues* not only bring to light the works of such authors as Marie-Thérèse Humbert, Lindsey Collen, Ananda Devi, and Natacha Appanah among others. They also reveal the extent to which the questions examined by these authors are implicated in some of the most pressing debates currently unfolding among scholars of world, comparative and African literature. In other words, we would do well to include analyses of works by Indian Ocean writers in our theorizing about world literature, comparative literature, and most assuredly, African literature.

There are however, additional questions calling for reflection: how, for example, might Lionnet's Creole relate to Taiye Selasi's *Afropolitan*? Will the principle of creolization suffice as a response to the new nationalisms and fundamentalisms of the early twenty-first century? Will the principle of creolization suffice as a response to the tensions unleashed over identity and immigration around the world today? The specific relationship between creolization and cosmopolitanism as frameworks for understanding multicultural encounter is likely to be a subject of discussion for some time to come. Another point of debate for scholars in postcolonial studies: while Lionnet explores identified instances of political and economic

marginality in the Indian Ocean area as represented by writers like Ananda Devi and Lindsey Collen, these matters tend to recede to the background in her more theoretically focused discussions of the Creole and creolization. It is my hope that a new generation of scholars might pursue answers to these questions. If they do, it will not be the first or the last time that work by Françoise Lionnet has instigated debates and pointed the way to new research agendas.