

2012 ACLA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

FRANÇOISE LIONNET

Shipwrecks, Slavery, and the Challenge of Global Comparison: From Fiction to Archive in the Colonial Indian Ocean

THE INDIAN OCEAN has always been the most “global” of all oceans. It is the oldest in human history and has enabled contact among travelers, scholars, and merchants of the most diverse origins for more than 5000 years. It figures in a sizable corpus of travel narratives and other literary genres that have influenced the direction of European literary movements from the eighteenth century to the present. Yet it remains, among U.S.-based humanists, the least studied of the large bodies of water that link continents, archipelagos, and their inhabitants. Historian Michael Pearson has suggested that a better name for the Indian Ocean might have been the “Afrasian Sea.” More apt geographically, this designation is more inclusive. It removes the implication that one area, India, is privileged and refocuses attention on the African, Middle Eastern, Arabian, and other Asian elements of the whole region. In addition, the rival interests of warring European empires led them to lay claim to islands and continental littoral areas, ensuring their continued presence as “Indian Ocean Rim” nations.¹ For the

This essay differs somewhat from the multimedia Presidential Address given on 30 March 2012 at the ACLA meeting. I am focusing here on the literary elements that are more appropriate for *Comparative Literature*. I thank the journal and our Association for this opportunity to share a small aspect of the literary history of my country of origin, Mauritius, the Ile de France of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s time. The island’s two-hundred-year tradition of Francophone literature remains little known to most scholars working in the United States today. This essay is an adapted and translated version of a section of my 2012 book *Le su et l’incertain*. I thank Alexis Pernsteiner for her help with translations. See also Lionnet, “‘New World’ Exiles” for a discussion of both eighteenth- and twentieth-century authors from the Mascarene region.

¹ The French Départements d’Outre-mer of Réunion and Mayotte and the British Indian Ocean Territory of the Chagos Archipelago ensure that those nations have a foothold in the area. In addition,

Sun King Louis the XIVth, French possessions around that ocean were to form part of a “Gallia Orientalis” or Oriental Gaul, whereas for the early twentieth-century Mauritian historian Auguste Toussaint, these Francophone areas belonged to a geography that he proposed to name “Franconesia.” Although none of these alternative toponyms have survived, they demonstrate the multiplicity of cultural influences at work in the region, as well as the competing narratives of belonging to which those influences gave rise over the centuries.

In recent years, Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Pacific studies have grown in importance as part of what is now known as “the new thalassology” (Vink). But the Indian Ocean as a field of study has yet to acquire legitimacy among literary scholars. This regional neglect is part of a broader “disregard for global ocean travel . . . so spectacular, it might be called hydraphasia” (14), as Margaret Cohen has suggested in her study *The Novel and the Sea*. Historians and social scientists have studied the traffic in goods and bodies and the circulation of imperial agents across oceans; writers of the African diaspora have engaged imaginatively with the “submarine” history of the middle passage; and critical interest in the literature of indentured servitude is growing. But the “wild terraquous environments” (Cohen 11) that are the liquid ground of early modern travel narratives and many modern novels with their “theaters of sublime terror” (113) have not, until recently, been important to the field of novel studies. Cohen attributes this state of affairs to “a key feature of Cartesian models of knowledge: the privilege accorded the mind over the body, attended by the denigration of embodiment, applied knowledge, and practical reason” (57), which are the skills most necessary for survival in merely difficult or truly catastrophic circumstances, from scurvy and dysentery, storms and hurricanes, encounters with pirates or enemy ships, to, most of all, the ever-looming danger of being shipwrecked due to human errors of navigation. Judging by the canonical European tradition, Cohen is of course right; but alternative genealogies of the novel indicate otherwise, given the importance of migration and ocean travel for colonial writers, for the sedentary authors and readers who avidly enjoyed those narratives, and for postcolonial novelists.

In this essay, I look at one strand in the cultural and literary dynamics of the Indian Ocean region from the eighteenth century on. This strand links Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie* to many contemporary visual artists and novelists, including the Indian Amitav Ghosh (who divides his time between New York and Goa, but is, I believe, a Mauritian at heart). My goal is to offer a comparative view of the Indian Ocean as both lived space and site of memory in the works of these two writers and in the archives they exploit. I will explore the respective importance of fiction and history as tools for the discursive construction of identities in a region that only *appears* to remain marginal to world history and literature because of its perceived remoteness from Western centers of learning. In keeping with the theme of the 2012 ACLA conference held at Brown University, “Collapse/Catastrophe/Change,” I focus on a historic catastrophe, the 1744

the U.S. maintains a military base on Diego Garcia, an atoll of the Chagos, under long-term lease from the British. I should also point out that during the late eighteenth century the then Isle de France was an important transit point for American ships crossing the Indian Ocean: the island was French, the French and the Americans were allied against the British, and the island played a crucial part in the history of American presence and commerce in a region increasingly dominated by the British.

shipwreck of the *Saint Gérant* off the coast of Mauritius, after an almost five-month journey from the Brittany port of L'Orient (Lorient today) in western France, via the slave-holding Island of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal. Bernardin's fictional use of this shipwreck in his best-selling 1787–88 novella changed the course of French literary and cultural traditions, inaugurating themes that would launch Romanticism and exert a lasting influence on codes of femininity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ghosh builds on this tale in the first volume of his *Ibis* trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, and his original re-reading is one salutary destabilization of the myths associated with Bernardin's narrative and its long-standing symbolic consequences.

I begin by discussing Ghosh's first book, *In an Antique Land*, which deals with medieval cultural and commercial exchanges in the northern part of the Indian Ocean. Ghosh's method will help me think through real and fictional accounts of the *Saint Gérant* disaster, while also enabling me to articulate the need for a serious revision of the history of this wreck and the part it actually played in the self-understanding of the peoples of Mauritius, the erstwhile Ile de France, with its distinguished tradition of print culture in French ever since Bernardin's time (see Lionnet, "Cosmopolitan or Creole Lives?" and "'New World' Exiles"). I will then turn to *Sea of Poppies* and its heroine Paulette as a way both to re-imagine early sea voyages to the Mascarenes and to put into crisis received notions of gender and loss in both French and postcolonial literary histories.

In an Antique Land is an unclassifiable hybrid book that is at once a travel narrative, an anthropological history, and a work of fiction. Ghosh blends archival discoveries with his first impressions and field notes from a 1980 research trip to the Egyptian village of Lataifa, southwest of Alexandria. In the Prologue, he explains that his trajectory as a student and, later, the writing of this book were motivated by a chance 1978 discovery (in the Oxford library) of the existence of a twelfth-century Indian slave named Bomma, a commercial agent in the service of a Jewish merchant whose trade between India and Egypt passed through the Port of Aden. Ghosh learned of this compatriot from another era in a note provided by the translator and editor of the book *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*. The note describes the merchant, Abraham Ben Yijû, as a clever and ingenious man, a respected rabbi, and a poet in his spare time. It explains that Bomma was his "slave and business agent, a respected member of his household" (7). The commentary, which makes the initially surprising association between "slave" and "business agent," is in reference to a missive sent to Ben Yijû in 1139 by his Arab correspondent in Aden, Khalaf ibn Ishaq. In an aside at the end of his letter Khalaf asks the Jewish merchant to extend his warm greetings to Bomma, thus expressing his admiration and affection for the slave.

Ghosh's immediate reaction upon reading these lines is one of surprise, followed by a pressing desire to understand the living and working conditions of Bomma, "the Slave of MS H.6," the name under which the original manuscript is filed in the archives. Following this thin lead, Ghosh throws himself into a hunt for additional information that will enable him to reconstruct the historical and cultural contexts in which the Hindu slave lived. Ghosh identifies with Bomma: like him, he is an "infidel" among the Egyptian Muslims whom the slave regularly fre-

quented between 1130 and 1150 on behalf of his master Ben Yijû. Originally from Tunisia, Ben Yijû had spent time in Cairo and Aden before settling for almost twenty years in Mangalore, India, where he succeeded in amassing a considerable fortune, thanks in part to the commercial activities facilitated by Bomma.

History has retained few traces of these men, but they serve as an entry into the cosmopolitan and erudite universe of the northern Indian Ocean. Ghosh provides a magnificent description of that world prior to Vasco de Gama's arrival in 1498. It is a world brimming with the "rich confusions that accompany a culture of accommodation and compromise" (237) and favor commercial as well as linguistic and social exchanges. But it is the enigma of the "slave" that captures the attention of the reader from the Prologue on, for it was he who "authorized" Ghosh as a young student to begin his fieldwork in the village of Lataifa: "I knew nothing then of the Slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement" (xx), the writer explains. His narrative then alternates between the past and the present, between medieval and contemporary encounters. The book ends with a harsh critique of the historiographic practices that tend to solidify rigid categories of academic thought, since these can then lead to artificial distinctions that justify violence and divisions.²

A paper encounter thus puts Ghosh on a path to the distant past and fuels both his curiosity and tenacity as an investigator, an experience undoubtedly familiar to researchers who stumble upon discoveries in their archival explorations. In 2009, I myself was stopped short in the Mauritius Archives while reading official reports on the *Saint Géran* shipwreck, which took place in the austral winter of 1744 off Amber Island, a coral islet less than a mile from the eastern shore of Mauritius. I did not know that there had been survivors among both crew and passengers, all of them deposed by the French East India Company. One—and only one—of these depositions reports the existence of a black woman who apparently survived the disaster for a few hours. Given the superhuman efforts required of the swimmers who did survive, this fact, simple yet extraordinary, made me wonder: who was this woman? After some research, I learned that she remains today entirely anonymous, as no one has paid her much mind.³ This essay is the result of reflections inspired by my perplexity with respect to the historical, memorial, and cultural silence that continues to shroud the enigmatic woman of Amber Island. Discovering her in the archives jolted me into realizing the extent of the lacunae surrounding the historic realities of the southwestern Indian Ocean, as well as the degree to which fiction has contributed to masking those realities. Indeed, a stunning and puzzling truth hides behind the well-known legend created by Bernardin's *Paul et Virginie*.

Written in part while he was posted in Mauritius for three years (1768–71) as engineer and botanist in the service of the island's *Intendant*, Pierre Poivre, who developed the spice trade (his name is linked to the pepper plant, "poivre" in

² The letters figured among the miraculous findings of 1896 in the *genizah* (or sacred depository) of Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue; the originals can be found today in the Cambridge University Library.

³ The depositions can now be found in digital form at the Web address http://www.histoire-genealogie.com/article.php?id_article=384, last accessed 3 March 2012. They, along with the complete ship roster, are featured in Heim's work (120–56). Blot gives a partial list of the passengers who were guests at the captain's table (76), and his notes also provide much useful material (220, 228–30).

French) and with whom Bernardin did not get along, the novella was completed in France in 1787.⁴ It gives to posterity a long-lived ingénue who pales by comparison to two real women—the anonymous black survivor and the historic Jeanne Baret, companion of Philibert Commerson, about whom more in a moment—and one fictional character: the lively Paulette of *Sea of Poppies*, who has more in common with the female travelers of her time than did Virginie.

Bernardin immortalized the wreck of the *Saint Gérân* in a romantic tale that, as Raymond Heim argues, elevated the young Virginie to the status of “national heroine” of Mauritius (3). This fiction has proved more powerful than reality. In the book, Paul and Virginie are inseparable from birth and raised together in harmony with nature by their respective mothers: Marguerite, a peasant woman from Brittany, seduced and subsequently abandoned by a libertine, and Madame de la Tour, the widow of a faithful gentleman who dies of fever during a trip to Madagascar, where he had gone to buy slaves. The two women, forming an unorthodox family unit, have a devoted slave couple at their service. Against the backdrop of an idyllic pastoral setting, Virginie grows into adolescence and falls in love with Paul. Meanwhile, Madame de la Tour has received a letter from France that will soon change everything. Her wealthy aunt announces that she would like Virginie to be sent to live with her so that the girl may “receive a good education, a place at the court, and the gift of all her wealth” (165). On the urging of her mother and the governor of the island (a father figure), Virginie leaves to pursue her education and is separated from Paul for more than a year, receiving no news at all, since her great-aunt intercepts all her correspondence with the young man. Deeply unhappy, Virginie is not able to adapt to European ways and decides to return home. Disowned by her great-aunt, she boards the *Saint Gérân*. When, at the end of the long journey, the ship hits a reef within sight of land, Virginie refuses to shed her long heavy clothes, despite being advised that doing so may increase her chances of survival, and she drowns before Paul’s eyes. A Creole heroine who dies for desiring both her country and Paul, and for naively holding on to her prudish “virtue,” Virginie subsequently became an icon of romantic chastity throughout the world, an icon, moreover, that has influenced literary history in France, Europe, Latin America, and Mauritius.

No one has inquired whether the death of this prudish girl was actually a fictional counterpoint to a far more curious and captivating reality for contemporary readers: the documented presence of a black woman who escaped from the wreck and died of exhaustion soon after reaching the beach on Amber Island. Her survival, while brief, is a vivid contrast to Virginie’s death. How did she do it? What personal, physical, and mental qualities did she prove capable of during the long journey and in her struggle against waves and strong currents? Thanks to the deposed crewmembers’ testimonies, we know that it took the survivors more than five hours to swim to shore while clinging to a curved plank from the ship, as did this woman. Yet it is the homesick, modest Virginie who remains comfortably lodged in our Francophone imagination, for the “natural” virtue of Bernardin’s characters, especially the passivity of the well-behaved Virginie, limited colonial and romantic conceptions of the feminine to outmoded notions of impossible purity. Of course, for the embittered and disenchanted author that Bernardin had

⁴ For a discussion of realism and exoticism in *Paul et Virginie*, see Lionnet, “Littérature-monde.”

become, *Virginie* served as a counterpoint to the corruption and depravation, both in Paris and among the colonial elites, that he sought to expose as the fatal consequences of European decadence and degeneration on the eve of the Revolution. However, it would seem that another truth is hidden behind the legend that has, for more than two centuries, usurped a place of honor in the island's national memory to the detriment of flesh-and-blood women who could not compete with the melancholic and vulnerable heroine of the 1787 narrative.

Paul et Virginie belongs to a genre of novels that Doris Sommer has called "foundational fictions," narratives that served as an ideological foundation for the emergence of national(ist) discourse in the countries of the New World. For Sommer, such narratives marked the hearts and minds of generations of citizens, with tropes and a discursive logic that served to embellish a foundational myth and foster a particular form of patriotism that idealizes the relationship to the nation. These stories offered colonial readers a sort of sentimental education that prepared them for collective life in a national space understood as an extension of the patriarchal family, a unit from which one strays at one's peril. This affective preparation relies on images and tropes whose emotional charge becomes more pronounced over time, as fiction's reality-effect participates in the construction of the collective national identity and in the emerging literary traditions of the colony and, later, the nation. In Mauritius, *Paul et Virginie's* themes of distance, painful exile, and impossible return have been common tropes for two centuries.

The reception of the novella by Mauritian readers made the book a foundational fiction and a veritable site of memory in Pierre Nora's sense: its material traces are to this day scattered throughout the national landscape: engravings, statues, tombs, street names, hotel names, even tombstones and the fables they perpetuate for romantic tourists. The book is thus both document and monument, and, as Vijayen Valaydon has pointed out, it is the point of departure for Mauritian literature in French. As a literary monument, it weighs heavily on the country's Franco-phone imaginary, since the themes and descriptive realism inherited from Bernardin continue to have an "incontrovertible" (315) influence on the writings of many Mauritians, from the Nobel laureate J.M.G. Le Clézio to Marie-Thérèse Humbert or Natacha Appanah (Lionnet, "Critical Conventions" and *Écritures féminines*). In addition, artists and writers from around the Indian Ocean (such as the Mauritian-South African Berni Searle or the Australian Helen Pynor⁵) have made rich visual and intertextual use of *Paul et Virginie* in their creative work.

Ghosh's re-reading in *Sea of Poppies* destabilizes this founding myth of the Mauritian nation and the colonial fictions associated with it. His Paulette, along with the slave Bomma, are for me useful intermediaries between *Virginie* and the unknown black survivor of the *Saint Géran*, whose history will someday have to be "invented" in order to satisfy what I believe to be an important memorial duty or national *devoir de mémoire*. But while Ghosh's method in *In an Antique Land* might be an inspiration to Mauritian novelists (and I would hope that someone does take up the challenge of writing a novel about this anonymous survivor), it is rather the content or the theme of one of Ghosh's main narrative threads in *Sea of Poppies* that I want

⁵ As I argue in a work in progress, Pynor's *Liquid Ground*, her eerie 2010 large-scale photographic series of white dresses and shirts floating in greenish water, provides an uncanny echo of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century engravings inspired by *Paul et Virginie*, especially the illustration *Le Naufrage de Virginie* by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, which was used for the novella's 1806 edition.

to analyze in detail here in order to foreground the role of early women voyagers in the Indian Ocean, be they slave or free, traveling alone or accompanied.

To understand the past and its bearing on the present requires that we examine what influences, consolidates, or obliterates our relationship to multiple others in multiethnic and multicultural contexts. An exploration of the myth of origin that *Paul et Virginie* has become for Mauritian readers thus seems to me a pressing task, especially since this myth speaks more or less explicitly on (and to) several levels of society. Understanding what it means, and especially what it serves to conceal, would teach us a great deal about the visual and discursive prejudices that continue to haunt today's private and public spaces in former slave societies, the U.S. included. Such a project falls outside the scope of the present article; however, thinking about Ghosh's work has allowed me to take another look at the historic event of the wreck so as to understand how and why the country's colonial, postcolonial, and Francophone imaginary remains so closely intertwined with the popular fictions devised by Bernardin, for although the event itself was no doubt tragic, it is also, in the end, rather banal when viewed in the context of the thousands of shipwrecks that have marked the history of sailing in the Indian Ocean since the Middle Ages.

If scraps of medieval letters can make a subaltern like Bomma emerge from the past and be brought to life again by an author who rightly pays him homage, then it stands to reason that the eighteenth-century archives on the Mascarene Islands could prove a worthwhile read or re-read in light of creative postcolonial approaches like Ghosh's. Gaps in history do not constrain him: to the contrary, Ghosh sees his own dilemmas as an anthropologist and historian with a fresh eye as he reflects on the disciplinary problems posed by a more or less strict adherence to scholarly methods that favor overly scriptocentric materials, even if, as historians from Michel Foucault on have demonstrated, one can obviously interpret the written record in ways that would subvert received ideas, just as one can read between the lines in order to begin to imagine another world than the one presented in archival materials that mainly reflect a colonialist mentality.

Ghosh takes into account both material and immaterial traces left by social agents whose ordinary lives have not been chronicled in a way that would or could easily be read by posterity, despite being crucial to an understanding of the present. Explaining his fortuitous discovery of the reference to the slave of manuscript MS H.6, he underscores what is extraordinary about the encounter that sent him to other libraries on a hunt for new clues. He writes:

The reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential . . . the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave . . . was not of that company; in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all. (*In an Antique Land* 16–17)

In order better to understand Bomma, who had the fortune of passing through a high place of medieval knowledge, Ghosh must question the methods he is expected to uphold as a specialist: his discovery highlights the errors, the blind spots, and the dead zones of scholarly discourse, or what some late-twentieth-

century anthropologists and historians have termed the “methodological madness” (Khatibi) of the social sciences, subjecting their disciplines to a telling critique. And indeed, subjectivity and imagination have always proved important allies in the “scientific” work of reconstructing the past.

To imagine Bomma’s trajectory, Ghosh proceeds in the manner of Toni Morrison, who, in novels like *Beloved* or *A Mercy*, seeks to understand slavery such as it was lived by the slaves themselves. To do this, she explores the workings of a subjectivity that is foreclosed to her, the subjectivity of those who do not figure into the “hard” evidence found in archives, because, as Ghosh says so well, they do not have “the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time.” Our knowledge of slavery and indentured servitude in the Mascarene Islands is similarly incomplete, and it will take great efforts of the imagination to recreate the experiences and feelings of individuals (like the woman survivor of the *Saint Géran*) whose status denied them the right to count among “the literate and the consequential.”⁶ It would take a formidable effort of memory to begin to define the parameters by which the human and cultural contributions of men and women as yet unrecognized by history could begin to emerge. Unfortunately, this lacuna about the creolized history of the Mascarenes seems due as much to a lack of interest as it is to a poverty of imagination.

Throughout his career, Ghosh has offered important re-readings of the dynamics underlying cosmopolitan and creolizing encounters in the region. In the fictional trilogy he is currently developing he charts the 1838 adventures of the three-mast *Ibis*, host to passengers from all walks of life, including Indian indentured servants and slaves headed for the sugar plantations of Mauritius. In this trilogy, Ghosh’s themes, together with his style and choice of creolized idioms, show how historic proximities created new hybrid cultures, structured mentalities, and transformed languages. In addition, his surprising use of *Paul et Virginie*, Paulette’s favorite bedtime reading in *Sea of Poppies*, offers an inventive take on the literary history of the region.

Paulette is the daughter of a French botanist, Pierre Lambert. Lambert, who arrives in Ile de France in the eighteenth century, marries a young local woman, then leaves for India with his wife, taking on the job of curator of the botanical gardens of Calcutta. But his wife dies in childbirth, and Paulette—the daughter of a French father and a Mauritian mother—grows up in Bengal with her milk brother, the Muslim Indian Jodu. Together they form an interracial sibling couple that clearly evokes the famous children in Bernardin’s novella. With this reference to Bernardin, Ghosh gestures toward his Francophone readers, although he cleverly covers his tracks, since Paulette is presented as the confident heir and offspring of the region’s diverse cultures. She is a French-Mauritian-Indian, who is at ease in her home of Bengal and does not express the slightest degree of exilic melancholia:

the first language [Paulette] learnt was Bengali and the first solid food she ate was rice and rice-and-dal khichri cooked by Jodu’s mother. In the matter of clothing, she preferred saris to pinafore—for shoes, she had no patience at all, choosing, rather to roam the Gardens in bare feet, like Jodu. Through the early years of their childhood, they were all but inseparable, for she would neither sleep nor eat unless Jodu was present in her room. (62)

⁶ There were some rare exceptions: for example, the educated and enfranchised African mother of the astronomer and botanist Jean-Baptiste Lislet Geoffroy, whose name, Niama, together with a few biographical elements have been preserved.

While the pairing of Jodu and Paulette recalls the inseparable siblings of Bernardin's novel, the resemblance stops there; the trilogy's romantic couple is rather Paulette and Zachary Reid, the mixed-raced and freed son of a slave from Baltimore, who signed on as a sailor and now navigates the Indian Ocean. This free American, who begins life on the ship's manifest as "black," later succeeds in passing for white, which obviously affords him considerable advantages.

In Calcutta, Zachary reveals his own zones of discomfort when Paulette, to whom he is attracted, surprises him by announcing that she wants to disguise herself as a boy so that she can join her brother Jodu on the *Ibis*. She is following the example of her great-aunt Jeanne Baret (also Baré or Bart, depending on the archival document), who, also disguised as a boy, accompanied the botanist Philibert Commerson on his travels in 1766. This is the narrator's explanation for Zachary's response:

The sight of [Paulette] had caught more than his eyes: that he might speak with her, walk out with her—he had wanted nothing more. But to think of that girl dressed in a sarong and headcloth, clinging barefoot to the ratlines, wolfing rice from a tapori and strutting the decks with the smell of garlic on her breath, that would be like imagining himself to be in love with a lascar; he would be like a man who'd gone sweet on an ape. (284)

Yet, if Zachary initially reacts with disgust to the idea of seeing Paulette pass for a sailor, a lascar, in this *romanesque* fictional world Zachary and Paulette come to understand that they are made for each other. As her soul mate, he seems to have "an intuitive sympathy for her circumstances," and he soon demonstrates "an unquestioning acceptance of her sisterly relationship with Jodu" (406–07). As for Paulette, she realizes that "if there was anyone on the *Ibis* who could match her in the multiplicity of her selves" (407), it was Zachary, for his racial and cultural identity is also ambiguous and shifting.

The *Ibis*, with its crew and passengers from varied backgrounds, is a microcosm of the creolizing dynamics, alliances and conflicts, dangers and hopes of the colonial world. Ghosh blends history and fiction with his allusion to the first woman to have circumnavigated the globe, Jeanne Baret Commerson. Yet while Jeanne plays here her historic role as the woman who dressed in men's clothing in order to participate in Louis Antoine de Bougainville's expedition of 1766–69 and remained in Mauritius for many years, she also serves as a model (in both senses of the word) for this fictional great-niece, born in India and fiercely independent, pragmatic, determined, and ingenious. Paulette knows how to adapt to new circumstances and proves endlessly capable of meeting their demands. An androgynous version, then, not of Virginie, but of Paul, she is poles apart from the chaste romantic icon who dies because she does not know how to adjust to the exigencies of the moment and refuses to rid herself of the European clothing that hampers her ability to survive.

This clothing is an apt metaphor for the cultural deadweight that Virginie brings back with her from the corrupt and immoral country of her great-aunt, a foil to Jeanne Baret, who figures among the "liberated" women of a period that counted many, from Olympe de Gouges to Charlotte Corday and Théroigne de Mericourt. The character of Paulette, like the historic figure of Jeanne, is bold and audacious, and shows no sign of the vapid qualities associated with Virginie. Educated by her father—a disciple of Enlightenment philosophers, a free thinker and

revolutionary “involved, in his youth, in a revolt against his king” (63)—Paulette learns “through effort and observation” (12) to read the world in a scientific and reasoned manner, to speak several languages, and to make her own decisions. She is a cosmopolitan Creole woman, as well as a proto-feminist, whose itinerant life underscores the extraordinary mobility of this contact-rich region’s inhabitants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Like Bomma in Ghosh’s earlier *In an Antique Land*, Paulette represents a vector of unique historical experiences that have left few traces in the official record, but that Ghosh seeks to reinvent, in part, as he says in his interviews, by painting for his own amusement a fictional tableau to rival those of the great novelists of the sea from Herman Melville to Joseph Conrad and Patrick O’Brian, but also in part to fill the lacunae created by the disjunctures between the known and the uncertain. Ghosh easily counters Bernardin’s legacy of colonial melancholia with astute and concrete observations based on material evidence, creating a constellation of rich affective perspectives. He gives great immediacy to the relationships forged among the passengers of the *Ibis*, whose creolized vehicular idioms structure their existence as they begin to develop a new way of being in the floating and fluctuating world of this ship of migrants.

Furthermore, although Paulette is a child of the Enlightenment, she rejects, unlike Virginie, an offer (arranged for her by her father before his death) to “return” to Europe. She thus represents a “new” political and cosmopolitical subject rather than the “child of Nature” (125) described by a father whose philosophical ideas do not correspond to the “ordinary” lives of the mortals around them. Pierre Lambert raised her to “never [worship] at any altar except that of Nature,” and he explains that “the trees have been her Scripture and the Earth her Revelation. She has not known anything but Love, Equality, and Freedom” (125). However, this Rousseauism, which Bernardin (Virginie’s “father” or creator) also admired, promotes attitudes and concepts that contradict Paulette’s common sense. She chooses not to adopt the disembodied philosophical ideas of her father, who, living in isolation from the worst excesses of colonial society, relies on these lofty notions to maintain a good conscience. Instead, she prefers to trust her intuition, her good practical sense, and her body’s quotidian truths. For her, these concrete truths are just as important as reason, and she makes use of all the forms of knowledge at her disposal. With unflappable confidence, she stakes out her identity and her right to belong to her proper place, as unstable as it may be, and this instinctive way of thinking allows her to distance herself entirely from her father: “How wrong he was! How mistaken he had always been in his understanding of her, making her into that which he himself wished to be, rather than seeing her for the *ordinary creature* that she was” (126, my emphasis). Wishing to live as she grew up, Paulette is the Creole subject who refuses colonial mimicry (Bhabha). She is in no way interested in seeing Europe as either the horizon of thought or the only hope for the future.

Unlike Virginie, who had to “return” to a place she never knew, Paulette demonstrates a courage that can be attributed to her specific situation of being a mixed subject. She is not concerned with what is so burdensome and treacherous for the poor Virginie: namely, the latter’s detour to a hypocritical France

that both crushes her being and throws her into a perpetual state of virtuous piety. Indeed, that piety and virtue remain the primary identifying markers of Bernardin's heroine even today is a testament to the importance of this kind of sentimentality for French and Mauritian readers of the late eighteenth century. For these readers, Virginie represented the kinds of emotions that were supposed to help them transcend what was undoubtedly, like the colonial enterprise itself, a violent and uncertain existence. Ghosh has only harsh words for those who maintained a good conscience while supporting European expansionism and the trafficking of opium encouraged by the English that led to the Opium Wars of 1839. The captain of the *Ibis* voices this critique when he declares: "We are no different from the Pharaohs and the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretense of virtue, I promise you, that will never be forgiven by history" (242).

If there is a gesture of "return" in Ghosh's novel, it seems to be toward the island of Mauritius, the birthplace of Paulette's mother, *Mareech-dîp* (its Hindi designation, 126), although the reader of this trilogy cannot be sure whether or not Ghosh and the *Ibis* will take us there at the end of the odyssey. At ease in her saris, and passing for a Hindu woman, Paulette is not in disguise, for this is a *habitus* that comes to her from her childhood. When she is among the ship's Indian crewmembers, she is but an "ordinary creature," a "creature" of colonial history—from the word *crear* that gives us the word *Creole*. She understands what her botanist father, despite his interest in botanical hybrids, cannot: the fact that she is a native with Creole roots. Paulette thus proves capable of meeting the challenges of unforeseen situations and journeys. She does not seek to be anything other than what she has become through her experiences and the transmutations proper to the colonial and creolized world that surrounds her. Life on the *Ibis* turns on the fact that this community of migrants, indentured coolies, and slaves now includes a Paulette who is quite comfortable passing for a Hindu. Despite her nickname "Puggly" (*pagli* in Hindi means "mad" or "ill-fated"), she is neither crazy nor unfortunate; rather, she is the one who embodies the kind of practical reason that Margaret Cohen associates with the physical labor of maritime expeditions and adaptability to new situations. Since she refuses to seek the pure reason of her father's *philosophes*, she becomes a figure for the adventure story itself and the practical logic linked to its narrative developments.

To be capable, "to become worthy of what comes our way, . . . and from that place to be reborn, to recreate a birth for oneself" (175) as subject of one's own history, is, according to Gilles Deleuze, the very foundation of morality and ethics. This is what allows one to become an active agent, a purposeful actor on the political scene on which one happens to find oneself "situated." It is to live according to the logic that corresponds to that situation, in other words, with what Deleuze calls the *logic of sense*. For Ghosh, too, ethics is founded upon responsibility to our current situation or the journey on which we are "embarked," to cite Blaise Pascal. Paulette's voyage to her mother's Creole island thus functions as a perfect metaphor for the limits and potentialities of the human condition, its

crises and moments of calm. Sailing toward the unknown, the passengers on the *Ibis* have no certainty about anything on the planet—this changing mother-earth and fluid sea—the instability of which is set in stark contrast to the paternal convictions of the deceased Pierre Lambert. In short, the liquid ground of Paulette’s creolization gives the lie to his Enlightenment certitudes.

Toward the book’s close, the character Deeti, the coolie from Bihar, who has been ruined by the commerce of opium and saved from the funerary pyre of her widowhood, meditates on the ocean’s expanse and the uncertainty it engenders: “The water was as dark and still as the cloak of shadows that covers the opening of an abyss It was impossible to think of this as water at all—for water surely needed a boundary, a rim, a shore, to give it shape and hold it in place?” (363). Salt water, fearsome and polluting for the Hindus, known to coolies as black water or *Kala Pani*, is an unrestrained and uncontainable element that can even evoke the firmament: “This was a firmament, like the night sky, holding the vessel aloft as if it were a planet or a star” (363). Sea and sky are reflected in one another. Similar but different, they are linked by the same astral logic, which guides the ship’s migrants toward their initial destination, the Mascarene archipelago isolated in the middle of the ocean, that indispensable stopover for travelers to and from Asia, some of whom would end up having to stay there and make it their own.

From *In an Antique Land* to *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh underscores that chance encounters—on paper or in the flesh—can reveal truths that we must first learn to make our own before acting on them. For these truths will remain uncertain and undefined so long as we do not appropriate the right to pronounce them (or denounce them) and take them to their logical conclusions, regardless of the risk they might pose to the institutions that frame them—history and anthropology in *In an Antique Land*, codes of colonial and maritime communal living in the *Ibis* trilogy, and finally, the romantic myths posing as historical truths that are anathema to a democratic transformation of mentalities, especially with respect to the history of slavery. I would argue, then, that by raising these serious issues in the context of entertaining narratives, Ghosh has made important advances in the debate on responsibility and memory, and on periodization, literary tradition, and their postcolonial transformation.

Today, little is known about the past of the Creole cultures of the Indian Ocean and the imported knowledges they have absorbed. This is due to a lack of reliable “sources” regarding the material exchanges and intangible patrimonies of the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The arrival of Europeans in the Mascarenes was the beginning of a new era. However, when one hears arguments that these islands were not home to native populations, it is important not to forget that African, Malagasy, and Asian cultures all left concrete traces on the archipelago. These are of particular interest to linguists studying language and folklore (Haring); but there are also other traces buried deep in the archives that would do to be reinterpreted in light of new postcolonial perspectives. If needed, one could also make creative use of one’s imagination, like Morrison or Ghosh, in order to “invent” or simply give depth and richness to the all but forgotten lives of *real* people from the distant past. These lives continue to haunt our present despite, or

perhaps because of, phantasms created to disavow them and the common scenarios that applaud false virtue, as in the case of *Virginie*. Virtue is the unpardonable sentiment that eases the conscience yet may only be a symptom of bad faith.

As I have suggested above, one reality that has been documented but remains as yet a complete mystery is that of the anonymous black woman who should haunt the national memory of Mauritius. For me, this was the kind of discovery, like Ghosh's at Oxford, for which the immediate uses are not clear, except that the urge to do something with it becomes irresistible. Here, now, is the sentence in the archival document that brought me up short; it is taken from the deposition given by Pierre Tassel, the second boatswain, who, having made the long journey from L'Orient to Port Louis more than once for the French East India Company, was familiar with the coast of Ile de France and its outer islands: "The first pilot and a negress from Guinea arrived in the same place on a curve of the ship. Tassel gave them two glasses of wine from a cask that turned out to be full and that he broke open. One hour later, he found them both dead."

That is the one and only clue that remains of the real heroine of the *Saint Gérân*.

I am not the first to have happened upon this bit of information: Raymond Heim, Jean-Yves Blot, and Daniel Vaxelaire all mention it in their respective books and provide a good number of details about the journey of the *Saint Gérân*, its crew, its passengers, its approach to the outer islands, the successive steps leading up to the shipwreck on the morning of 17 August 1744, and the 1966 discovery of the wreck more than two centuries later in the *Passe des Citronniers*. Heim, Blot, and Vaxelaire provide a wealth of details that are useful for comparing the events of 1744 with Bernardin's novel. The originality of his romanticism and its impact on both his era and on our own contemporary mentality can now be better evaluated as an enduring cultural phenomenon. Although the significance of his descriptive prose as "realist writing" as opposed to romantic exoticism (Lionnet, "Critical Conventions") is undeniable, it also has its limits. On the one hand, *Paul et Virginie* is innovative in its depiction of landscapes and climactic phenomena still wrongly considered "exotic" by literary history. These descriptions all ring true for the reader from the tropics, hence the lasting and deserved success of a book that played a crucial role in the emergence of a Mauritian consciousness related to the specificities of the Creole environment.⁷ But, on the other hand, *Paul et Virginie* feeds a particularly tenacious myth that appeals to a colonialist mentality and thereby veils the difficult tragedies and historic realities of both known and unknown survivors of shipwrecks.

The book has stolen the spotlight; indeed, it has upstaged those who, unlike *Virginie*, fought against the sea's rough waves and currents to make it to shore. There were twelve; three ended up dying on the beach, among them this lone black woman. We know that the *Saint Gérân* picked up slaves in Gorée: "twenty black men and ten negresses, Yolofs as well as Bambaras," according to the testimony of two surviving crew members, Jean Janvrin, a ship's apprentice from Saint-Malo, and Pierre Verger, an adjutant gunner from L'Orient. But nothing is known of the slaves, except that they were undoubtedly chained in the ship's

⁷ See, for example, Lionnet, "Critical Conventions" and the articles by Marcel Dorigny, Catriona Seth, Arlette Fruet, Nicole Crestey, and Carolyn Vellenga Berman, to cite a few of the essays in the volume edited by Jean-Michel Racault et al.

hold when the wreck occurred. Tassel explains that “the first pilot and a Guinean negress” arrived in the same place as he on the beach of Amber Island, and that all the survivors had had to fight an onslaught of waves and a rough current for over five hours before reaching the shallow lagoon and landing on the shore. We also know that four of the servants accompanying their masters were black: two men, Henry Alexandre and Pedro, and two women, Magdelon, the servant of the young Jeanne Neizet or Neizein, and the “negress of the defunct Mademoiselle de Grignon,” as the passenger roster indicates. One of the missing passengers, a son of a Creole family from Bourbon Island (now Reunion), was a Sieur Guigné, who was traveling home with his servants.

Given the fanciful spelling of names in eighteenth-century depositions and colonial archives, it is likely that there was confusion among similar words such as Guinea, Guigné, and Grignon. What was the relationship between the only female survivor, that anonymous black woman “from Guinea,” and the other white passengers whose names and spellings we know? The similarity between the names Guinea, Grignon, and Guigné lends itself to mystification. For Blot, this woman is “without a doubt one of Guigné’s slaves” (62); for Heim, she is “a Senegalese”; Vaxelaire, basing his position on Heim’s book, unhesitatingly concurs, though perhaps a bit hastily: “One of the slaves from the Island of Gorée miraculously freed herself from the hold and swam with this white man to safety. This was not a frail Virginie, but a solid African woman, who pulled through like a man. No, better than a lot of men . . . it would have been nice to know more about this heroic slave woman” (150). Heim’s and Vaxelaire’s assessments are understandable, for the expression “from Guinea” was at the time a generic one that referred to slaves from any part of Africa. However, it is highly unlikely that one of them “miraculously freed herself from the hold.” There must have been confusion between the survivors’ testimony and what was actually recorded by the officials taking their depositions, and Vaxelaire appears to have completely forgotten the deceased young lady’s anonymous servant, whom Heim and Blot do mention. She was traveling under the same conditions as the other servants, which is to say that she was on the kitchen’s “rations” and thus better nourished and in better health, after five months at sea, than any of the female slaves would have been, even those who might not have been chained in the hold, as was sometimes the case for female Africans during these long voyages. My contention is that the unnamed servant of the defunct young woman could very well have managed to survive by jumping overboard when others were doing so; she could well have known how to swim and made use of the curved flotsam.

There was much speculation (in the early years of historical research on the wreck and its link to Bernardin’s book) as to whether one or the other of the two “fine” young female passengers (the *demoiselles de qualité*) on the *Saint Gérant*, Mademoiselle Caillou and Mademoiselle Mallet, served as a “model” for Bernardin’s Virginie. I am not interested in either these conjectures or Heim’s well-established assertion that Captain de La Mare, in a misplaced sense of propriety, refused to take off his jacket, the pocket of which contained “important documents” (as he is known to have put it), in spite of his valet’s suggestion that doing so might help him swim more easily. Like Virginie, he drowned. And, with him, other documents and useful elements of archival and eyewitness knowledge were washed away by the sea.

What I want to stress here is that the romantic tale of the virginal Virginie has served as a screen to hide another heroine, whose fate ought to haunt Mauritians today just as Bomma haunted Ghosh. But, in this case, the woman whose courage and endurance inspires admiration remains nameless. Her existence before the shipwreck is entirely concealed from us—though perhaps Mademoiselle de Grignon, if the black female survivor had indeed been in her service, could serve as the point of departure for a good deal of possible and doable research, not to mention another kind of novel than the one written by Bernardin. Perhaps a monument ought to be erected for this woman, as is common practice for the Unknown Soldier? Or perhaps a “counter-monument” to counterbalance all of today’s statues and images that only commemorate a fictional young woman?

It is perhaps time to face the continued and seemingly *ordinary* denials of slavery’s past and honor the courage and resistance of those whose lives have been inextricably linked to those of all the Creole women of the island, including the Virginies of our imaginations.⁸ It is perhaps time for a novel that would speak of another memory and open the mind of Mauritian readers to the diversity of persons present on the *Saint Géran*, that microcosm of our still colonial condition. Such a *postcolonial* novel, inspired by both Bernardin and Ghosh, could take its place next to a number of other Mauritian narratives that more or less explicitly make reference to the legend of Paul and Virginie and the disaster of 1744.

University of California at Los Angeles

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⁸ I am referring to the specific circumstances of Mauritius; however, in the U.S. also we have yet to commemorate fully the history of slavery the way it is now done in France every year on May 10th. In Mauritius, the date is February 1st.

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